

One of India's leading produce importers and distributors is making its first foray into production, having entered a joint venture with an Australian company to grow its blueberry varieties in the South Asia country.



India's IG International and Australia's Mountain Blue will together create a new company called BerryLife.

IG director Tarun Arora told *Fresh Fruit Portal* the company had been looking into growing fruit itself for a while, and this development marked an important milestone for the rapidly expanding entity.

"Berries are more and more in demand around the world, and in India we are also seeing this growth," he said.

"So we really wanted to work with a good company that has good technical know-how and varieties which we can bring to India to grow.

"We found out that Mountain Blue had excellent blueberry varieties which can easily be grown in India, so it really complements our strong infrastructure and strong distribution network."

He explained the Australian company had already carried out trials of its varieties in India, so it was confident they would perform well.

The first stage of 50 hectares is due to be planted in the first quarter of next year, with the inaugural harvest expected in 2019.

Arora said the varieties would likely be planted at four locations in Western India with different climatic factors in order to spread out the season.

While the initial harvests will run from February through August - which Arora pointed out

was an attractive window falling largely in between the South and North American seasons - the goal is to continue planting and ultimately achieve close to year-round production.

"Mountain Blue is very confident that we will be able to potentially grow berries for almost 11 months with the varietal selection that they have over the next five years," he said.

"For us a key goal is to not be dependent on imported blueberries."

Arora also explained Western India was chosen as the location for the BerryLife plantings due to its market accessibility.

"From the market point of view, distribution becomes so much easier because a large amount of the population is based around Western and Southern India," he said.

"Within hours you can be in the market, which plays in well as we plan to have a premium, niche market for our fruit. By being close to the market, the taste will not be compromised.

Mountain Blue managing director Andrew Bell said the joint venture was a very exciting opportunity for the company.

"I am personally very proud of this joint venture and see it as huge growth opportunity in India, which is a great market for fresh produce from around the world," Bell said.

Kiwifruit and avocados

While blueberries are the first fruit crop to be grown by IG, the company also has plans afoot to produce kiwifruit and avocados too. Arora said he was already in discussions and was hoping to close the deal "very soon".

In June, Arora said these were fruits that were largely not grown in India.

"If you see there are no avocados and blueberries so there is no competition at all," he said, adding they were cash crops currently being imported and sold at high prices.

"There is a market price we've already captured," he said.

"We just want to move that bandwidth so that by the time we have our own production we have enough market capabilities to be able to evacuate that production, but the key line will be to grow the best varieties that are available."

IG is currently seeing "phenomenal" growth, with sales value growth growing at an **annual rate of around 30%**.

Numerous cold storage facilities are also being built around the country to plug infrastructure gaps.

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