

Future Orchards 2012 - Western Australia Orchard Walk June 2007

Notes prepared by Alan Hill, Western Australian Fruit Growers' Association

Location: Logiudice's Orchard, South West Hwy, Donnybrook
Consultant: Steve Spark
Guest: Garry Langford

1.0 Listed topics from the Orchard Walk Programme Plan

- Previous crop results.
- Pruning and training techniques to maximize marketable yield.
- Tree architecture, light and vigour balance. Understanding the impact on tree growth, cropping performance and tree physiology
- Trellis structures and tree form
- New varieties, rootstocks and planting decisions.
- Risk Mitigation (hail, drought, frost and market)
- Orchard and Block profitability (this session will utilize results from the accounts analysis and block profit data collection exercises)

2.0 Presentation and Discussion

2.1 Background

The format of the June visit by the consultants was slightly different to previous activity in Western Australia, with the incorporation of additional activities at the request of the Monitoring Block Proprietors (MBP), following discussion at the previous (March) meeting.

The day's format was:

- An informal discussion and tour of Darbyshire's orchard (the morning of the 18th).
- The formal orchard walk presentations at Logiudice's orchard, commencing at 2.00 p.m.
- The field walk and pruning demonstration at Logiudice's orchard.
- MBP meeting.

2.2 Darbyshire's Orchard

At the previous orchard walk, both the MBPs and Agfirst had agreed to incorporate additional activity during the (essentially) one day which the consultants spend in WA, per round of orchard walks.

As a result, an additional activity was conducted on the morning of the 18th with 4 MBPs plus WAFGA and DAFWA staff meeting to discuss a series of prearranged topics with Steve and Garry, and to walk through a number of blocks on the orchard.

In welcoming those present to his orchard, Ben Darbyshire, highlighted several issues from a set of notes from a 1991 Western Australian Apple Conference commenting that over the course of the subsequent 15 years, a number of orchard management issues were still yet to change for the better. Although this was due to both cultural and financial reasons, Ben highlighted the need to focus on what changes you can make rather than continue with the “it’s all too hard” attitude. He also commented on the importance of the MBPs to sharing information to move forward and how useful he has found it seeing what others are doing on their orchards.

Issues discussed on the walk through Darbyshire’s orchard were:

- The definition of crop load relating to what is actually sold rather than what is picked.
- Following marked trees through for a whole season to measure and track crop load.
- Over the summer many experienced “cooked fruit” as a result of over exposure from pulled down/tied down branches.
- Netting options still needs more investigation and costing analysis.
- Weak wood grows small fruit so thinning now at pruning assists with thinning later.
- Tying or pulling down branches stops them from growing. Cutting them encourages more growth.
- To stop height growth paint cut with 2% NAA mixed with pruning paint.
- Bud counts are very important to give indication of meeting targets.

2.3 Formal OW presentations at Logiudice’s orchard.

Three presentations were made, entitled Block Profit, Pruning and Training to Maximise Marketable Yields (Steve Spark) and Varietal Strategies for Future Success (Garry Langford). The accompanying notes for these were presented to all attendees, with the power point presentations being offered to the MBPs.

Whilst the presentations largely followed the notes there was some deviation to explore discussion which developed from the attendees.

Discussed issues were:

- A lack of use by growers of the Future Orchards 2012 website (Refer to Action 1).
- Growers expressed concern about the lack of availability of dwarfing rootstocks in Western Australia.
- The lack of labour for semi-skilled activities such as pruning.

2.4 The field walk and pruning demonstration at Logiudice's orchard.

The pruning demonstration occurred in a block of Pink Lady apples, planted in 1992 on MM104 rootstock at 3.3 x 5.0 meters (606 trees/Ha).

In this session, Steve reinforced the need keep the pruning to the 'basics' and this would lead to cost benefits by establishing a realistic number of fruit/tree, and would deliver a system where pruning could be conducted by unskilled casual staff with minimal levels of training.

2.5 MBP meeting.

A considerable amount of discussion about future activity with the project had occurred throughout the day with an agreement that MBPs would work with the project staff to establish a small demonstration in each block where trees were pruned to bud counts, and that these would then be monitored through the next season to evaluate its effect on fruit size & quality (Action 2).

Steve also noted that given the limited time available it would be preferable for as much information on the issues that the MBPs wished to discuss with either he or Craig Hornblow at future events, be forwarded to them prior to their arrival in WA (Action 3), and also requested that DAFWA provide climatic information for growing regions (Action 4).

3.0 Actions

- Facilitator to publicise the FO 2012 website in future editions of the WA Fruit Grower and in general interactions with growers.
- Demonstration bud pruning blocks to be established in each Monitoring Block.
- Facilitator to liaise with MBPs to arrange for collation and forwarding of issues to Consultants, prior to next visit.
- DAFWA (John Sutton) to provide climatic information to Consultants.
- Facilitator to arrange for photo points, data sheets and account analysis to be collected as per the June 2006 facilitator's notes.
- Facilitator to follow up with growers Williamson and Patane with regard to their involvement as monitoring block proprietors