

Member Profile: Growing Cool Climate Passionfruit in Western Australia

Thea Walker

My name is Thea Walker and together with my family, we run a mixed horticultural and livestock farm in the Southern Forests region of Western Australia, approximately 300 km south of Perth. Traditionally a tobacco, apple and vegetable farm, we have diversified over the past 15 years and are currently producing three very different crops – avocados, passionfruit and truffles.

Whilst the southwest of WA may not be the first place that comes to mind when you think of growing tropical fruit such as avocados and passionfruit, our very unique climate allows these crops to thrive alongside cold and frost loving crops such as truffles.

Our journey to passionfruit began seven years ago when we were looking for a profitable and fast-growing crop to replace apples and figs under hail netting. After seeing other farmers in the region successfully growing the ‘Sunshine Special’ variety, we planted our first 200 vines on the original apple trellis and have had several more plantings since. Whilst growing under netting does have its own set of challenges such as fungal problems due to the increased humidity, it has been successful in helping reduce frost and sunburn risk, and thus improving our fruit quality and the plant’s ability to thrive in a cooler climate.

The Western Australian passionfruit industry produces two crops per year, with the main crop occurring in autumn and a smaller but often high value crop in spring, allowing us to supply fruit to the market often outside the rest of the country. Whilst the colder climate can often mean it takes an extra year for our vines to reach maximum production in comparison to those grown in more tropical regions, our region is unique in that our vines remain productive and only need replacing every six to seven years.

Currently, the Sunshine Special variety is the most common cold tolerant variety commercially grown in the southwest of WA and is harvested off the ground rather than picked off the vine. This exposes the fruit to skin blemishes when falling as well as becoming a laborious task to pick up. Fortunately, our farm has been supplying seconds passionfruit to Mitchell and Jen from Willarra Gold in Manjimup, over the past few years, who have found innovative ways to value add these “imperfect” fruit to ensure there is minimal waste in the industry.

As passionfruit is still a relatively new industry in Western Australia, it is a focus of ours at Seven Days Farm, as well as of other growers in the region, to work towards creating a sustainable industry going forwards. Over the next few years, we are working to generate multiple variety and rootstock trials with the aim to find or develop suitable cold tolerant genetics for our climate that will help to increase our yields, extend our growing season, ripen on the vine, reduce genetic risk and help to grow the West Australian passionfruit industry overall.

Even though there are limited growers in Western Australia, it is the collaboration and the sharing of knowledge which has allowed our industry to thrive so far. Whilst I have not been a part of the industry for as long as many of you, I look forward to getting to know you all, expanding my knowledge and building relationships with like-minded growers. The passionfruit industry in Australia is a very exciting one, with huge potential and I feel fortunate to be a part of its future.



Thea and father Jim Walker are growing the “Sunshine Special” variety on their mixed horticulture farm at Manjimup south of Perth in Western Australia. *Photo credit: Craig Kinder Photography*