

Spain: Coophuelva expands strawberry acreage by 42%

Strawberries have regained the role they had lost to some extent at the cooperative 'Costa de Huelva' (Coophuelva), in Lucena del Puerto. While two seasons ago (2015/2016) the planted acreage was reduced from 220 to 140 hectares, in the one that is about to start (2017/2018) it will reach around 200 hectares, which is a 42% increase.

According to the president of the company, Cristóbal Picón, this growth has been the result of two circumstances: firstly, because the results achieved in the last season "have been positive," which has motivated the partners to continue betting on the crop and slow down the trend of recent years of expanding the acreage devoted to blueberries and raspberries.

Secondly, and perhaps the most important reason, is that the cooperative has already managed to transform 70% of the three estates that they bought last September in Gibraleón's old marquesado ('San Sebastián', 'Laguna' and 'Valdeoscuro'). Picón explains that "of the total 650 hectares acquired, about 70 already have the necessary irrigation equipment and therefore, are ready for the plantations to be set up this year; in another 340, the only thing that remains is to install the water pipes, while no actions have yet been performed in the remaining 190.

The 70 new hectares that will be added this season to the 475 that the partners already had in the County are located in the estate of 'San Sebastián', which is located the municipalities of Gibraleón and San Bartolomé de la Torre. 60% of this area (about 40 hectares) will be devoted to strawberries; the rest will be divided between raspberries and early blueberries.

In order to meet the demand from the partners, the president of Coophuelva predicts that, compared to the previous campaign, when 12.5 million plants were used, "this campaign the figure will amount to between 15 and 16 million," which could entail a fresh production totalling around 12,000 tonnes; virtually twice as much as the volume harvested during the 2016/2017 season, when some 6,400 tonnes were marketed.

Regarding varieties, Cristóbal Picón stressed that the cooperative would maintain "the same proportion as last year, with 40% consisting of Fortuna, which is an early strawberry, and the remaining 60% divided between the Primoris (15%), Rábida (15%) and Rociera (30%).

All the plants, which are already being treated and selected at the cooperative's facilities, come from the nurseries that Coophuelva owns in Tordesillas (province of Valladolid) and Palacios Rubios (province of Avila).

Blueberries

In spite of this rebound recorded by strawberries, the Lucena del Puerto-based horticultural cooperative is still mostly devoted to the production of blueberries, with 382 hectares.

Although the president of the company, Cristóbal Picón, acknowledges that "blueberries have

reached their peak," he is convinced that "there is still a lot of market potential and many possibilities ahead, as long as things are done properly, of course."

For Picón, the objective "is to make the crop profitable, and in order to achieve this, the growers have to apply the best management techniques in the harvest. And this means that we have to work professionally and understand the crop."

What is now clear after the low prices paid in the final stage of the previous campaign "is that what used to be said, that with blueberries you can make a lot of money, is no longer true. It is true that everything used to be sold, because in the months of March, April and May there was no production in America and in Europe the harvest kicks off in July and August, but this year there has been a lot of supply during those months and supermarkets have set very high quality requirements. To prevent this from happening again, you must be prepared with both cold storage equipment and the right machinery to make sure that only the best fruit reaches the shelves, so that the consumer, who is paying 2 Euro for a 150-gram pot, will eat fruit in perfect condition. It is important not to deceive the consumer and we must take the utmost care in delivering quality, because that also helps in boosting consumption."

For this new campaign, the area devoted to blueberries by the cooperative has only grown by about 5 hectares, according to data provided by Cristóbal Picón. The varieties cultivated by the partners will be the early Snowchaser and Emerald (30%), which will be supplied by Royal; the Ventura (20%), which is from Fall Creek, and the Star (50%), which is produced between late April and early July.

The cooperative has grown from 4,600 tonnes in the 2015/2016 marketing year to 5,800 tonnes in the 2016/2017 campaign.

Diversification

Given the diversification strategy enforced by CoopHuelva, the acreage devoted to raspberries is also significant, as it currently amounts to about 203 hectares. The production, which begins in September and lasts until June, consists of both remontant and short day varieties owned by Onubafruit, such as the Kweli, Imara, Lagorie and Vajolet. The last campaign came to a close with a production totalling 2,900 tonnes.

In addition to the acreage devoted to blackberries (about 26 hectares that yield about 336 tonnes) and kiwiberries, the 'Costa de Huelva' cooperative is working to ensure that the 580 hectares of the Valdeoscuro farm, in Villanueva de los Castillejos, are fully operational for the 2018/2019 campaign.

The distribution of those hectares is not final, but the goal of CoopHuelva is to devote about 220 hectares to strawberries; another 180 to raspberries, blackberries and blueberries and about 200 to the production of avocados.

Coophuelva, which generated a turnover of about 70 million Euro last season (2016/2017) from the marketing (through Onubafruit) of about 18,000 tonnes of berries, also manages the farm 'Los Palmerales' of Trigueros (315 hectares). Some of the options under consideration for this large plot include the cultivation of blueberries and kakis.

Source <http://www.freshplaza.com/article/183877/Spain-Coophuelva-expands-strawberry-acreage-by-42-percent>