



Mountain pepper production

Introduction

The Mountain Pepper (*Tasmannia lanceolata*) is native to moist temperate forest areas in Tasmania, Victoria, Southern NSW and the ACT. Related species are found in cool elevated areas on the mainland east coast, from Victoria to Queensland.

The plant's fruits and foliage contain a hot chilli/pepper-like factor (polygodial), with a unique aroma and flavour. The peppercorn-like fruits, produced only on female plants, may be dried, ground or preserved in brine and leaves of both male or female plants are dried and milled and used to flavour sauces, chutneys, meats, cheeses, pate, breads, dampers, pastas etc. Extracts from the plant are added to chewing gum in Japan and are being examined for their anti-microbial activities.

Virtually all Mountain Pepper leaves and berries currently used are harvested from the wild from forestry concessions in Tasmania, though there is potential for cultivated production and some trial plantings have been established in the Adelaide Hills. Other cooler areas in South Australia may have potential and continuing information is required on the performance of Mountain Pepper under a range of climates and soil conditions.



Fig 1. Mountain pepper berries

Plant characteristics

Mountain Pepper grows naturally as a shrub to small tree (2 to 5 m high and wide), with glossy dark-green leaves and attractive bright red stems. It produces cream coloured flowers from October through to January depending on locality. Its berry-like fruits are 5 to 10 mm in diameter, beginning dark red and turning shiny black when ripe in summer or autumn. They generally appear only on female trees, though occasionally plants contain flowers of both sexes. Plant growth is moderate to fast under favorable conditions.

The plant appears to prefer neutral to acid organic soil, but will tolerate a broad range of soil types as long as they are well aerated and constantly cool if not regularly moist. It will tolerate severe frosts and even snow.

Production requirements

As well as being cool-climate adapted, the Mountain Pepper belongs to one of the earliest families of flowering plants and has a relatively primitive vascular system. As a result it has difficulty in transpiring enough water in high-demand situations. Adequate and carefully monitored irrigation and the use of mulching, overhead sprinklers and shade protectors, particularly when young, can help reduce water demand and cool the plant and the soil.

Overwatering should also be avoided as the plant appears susceptible to root-rot pathogens. Open soils with free drainage should help to mitigate root disease problems.

The plant responds well to pruning and hedging and high density hedgerow-type plantings, combined with mechanized leaf harvesting (similar to the system used in tea production) may be a feasible large-scale production option.

Potential returns

It is too early to provide useful yield and production cost estimates for Mountain Pepper grown under cultivation in South Australia. Currently, wholesale prices paid for dried, milled leaf range from \$20 to \$50 per kg depending on the supplier and quantity purchased. Wholesale prices paid for dried berries in whole or milled format range from \$20 to \$100 per kg. These prices are likely to fall if increased supplies become available from cultivated sources.



Fig 2. Fresh and dried leaves

Conclusion

While much needs to be learned about production methods, site and area suitability, the market demand for Mountain Pepper appears to be firming, and in cooler areas of South Australia the plant could present a useful diversification opportunity for primary producers.

Further information

Further information on native crops is contained in the other publications in this series:

Australian Native Citrus – Wild Species, Cultivars and Hybrids

Bush Tomato Production

Miscellaneous Native Food Crops – Davidson and Illawarra Plums

Miscellaneous Native Food Crops – East Coast Tree Species with Potential in SA

Miscellaneous Native Food Crops – Herbs and Vegetables with Potential in SA

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Native Food Background Notes

Native Food Crops – Frequently Asked Questions

Native Food Crops – Sources of Information

Quandong Production

Sunrise Lime Dieback

The Native Food Industry in SA

Wattleseed Production

These fact sheets are also available for download from the Australian Native Produce Industries website at www.anpi.com.au

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