

MOROCCO & UK

Moroccan venture bears fruit

African Blue, the newly formed Morocco-based blueberry grower-marketer, is poised to make a foray into European markets with its first commercial volumes

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African Blue, a pioneering Morocco-based blueberry growing and marketing venture backed by a group of Australian, British and Moroccan companies, is gearing up for its first commercial harvest this month as it looks to capitalise on growing demand for the fruit in Europe and Asia.

The Moroccan operation represents a joint venture between leading Australian blueberry grower-marketer Berry Exchange, Morocco-based strawberry giant Agro Gales, Australian grower and breeder Mountain Blue Orchards and leading UK soft fruit distributor Worldfresh. Berry Exchange and Agro Gales are the majority shareholders with 40 per cent respectively, while Worldfresh and Mountain Blue Orchards each hold a 10 per cent stake.

With their combination of cutting-edge varieties, growing expertise, on-the-ground infrastructure and strong retail relationships in the UK and Europe, these companies look set to leverage Morocco's lower production costs to bring a new dimension to the international blueberry market.

After several years under development, the project is set to yield its first commercial volumes in 2010. "We expect to harvest around 200 tonnes in this first season, and the production is all made up of our latest early-season varieties," explains Berry Exchange's Peter McPherson. "We'll start picking in mid-January and go through to April."

Most of the initial volumes will go the UK and European markets, with product sent easily by road via Spain, according to Mr



The venture expects to harvest around 200 tonnes in its first season

McPherson. "We'll also ship some fruit by air to our customers in Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore so they can get a feel for the product," he adds.

The early signs for the project look very encouraging, he notes. "We've had good growing conditions, the quality of the fruit and the bush look sensational and the timing will be perfect," says Mr McPherson. "The results from our recent Australian season with Marks & Spencer in the UK have been excellent in terms of acceptance of these varieties and we can now carry on through with our Moroccan production. This fruit will sell as an absolute premium line compared with the other blueberries available at this time."

Total Produce rolls out red carpet for new Princess

Total Produce subsidiary Redeva has announced it is set to begin commercial production over the next 12 months of a new strawberry variety, named Red Princess, which has been specifically bred for production in northern European climates.

The variety has been undergoing trials across Scotland over the past couple of years and growers are understood to be ready to begin production, with some 40,000 plantings due to enter the ground over the course of 2010.

According to Irene Geoghegan, Redeva's UK breeder and trial coordinator, Red Princess is the first ever variety to be bred by Total Produce specifically for Scotland and, she says, it has the potential to fill existing production gaps in the UK soft fruit season.

Mrs Geoghegan also believes the strawberry, which has been found to develop better in northerly climates where there are fewer hours of sunshine, has the potential to be produced successfully in other parts of northern Europe, in places such as Germany and Scandinavia.

Red Princess has been developed over the past six years using everbearers through an intensive breeding programme, initially in southern England and then in Scotland.

Mrs Geoghegan says that the Red Princess has a reasonably long potential production period: "The variety seems to prefer the Scottish climate and can give fruit from late May through, in some cases, until late October," she explains. "It's a vigorous, prolific variety, with a nice pink-orange colour, a heart shape and average brix of



Redeva's new strawberry variety, Red Princess

between nine and 12."

Red Princess, she adds, has the potential to work as a "good, all-round variety" and one which could therefore benefit from the extended Scottish berry production season.