

SPAIN

Planasa prepares new varieties

Spanish soft fruit breeder Planasa is moving full speed ahead with new development programmes for Mediterranean raspberries and blueberries

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Leading Spanish soft fruit Planasa is set to focus over the coming seasons on developing new varieties of raspberry and blueberry that are suitable for the Mediterranean climate; an area the company believes has not been exploited to anything close to its full potential.

According to Planasa's managing director, Alexandre Pierron-Darbonne, aside from Driscoll's varieties, there are "almost no raspberry breeding programmes for Mediterranean regions" currently in existence.

Planasa has stepped into this breach with plans for its own raspberry breeding initiative, which is currently in development stages, with a view to having its first varieties commercially available by as soon as 2011.

"The idea behind the programme is that there is now lots of demand across Europe for new raspberries for the Mediterranean climate that can be produced in the autumn and spring months," explains Mr Pierron-Darbonne.

"There is no really good variety for southern Europe – all those that have been developed to date have been for the north."

The company began its raspberry breeding project five years ago, by gathering germplasm from across the globe. The programme, says Mr Pierron-Darbonne, is now proceeding "at full speed" as it enters its second season of development.

Planasa is currently at an advanced stage of development with two selections, although the company's managing director emphasises that they do not yet know whether the varieties will be suitable for commercial use. "We don't know yet if we will use them, but we think they will be good enough to improve on those raspberry varieties that are available on the market at the moment," he says.

Mr Pierron-Darbonne believes Planasa will be ready to commercially launch new raspberry varieties as early as 2011 or, if these fail to prove suitable, at the very latest by 2013. "The programme is moving very quickly and

we are very excited about it," he says. "We are not yet there, but we can see light at the end of the tunnel."

The Spanish company is also currently developing a new range of blueberry varieties, as part of a recently-agreed collaboration with leading US blueberry nursery Fall Creek.



Planasa will showcase varieties at Fruit Logistica

"Last year, we reached an agreement with Fall Creek to work with them, with the idea being that we would have exclusive access to as many of their blueberry breeding programmes as possible," explains Mr Pierron-Darbonne.

The eventual aim of the collaboration, he continues, is that Planasa will be able to market new varieties of Fall Creek blueberries that have been exclusively bred for Europe.

To this end, the company has already planted a 3ha test plot in Segovia, northern Spain with Fall Creek varieties to test how they respond to the region's climate. A second experimental field will be planted this spring in Huelva, in the south of the country, which will also monitor how the berries are affected by the climate in the Mediterranean region.

Planasa has also been moving forward over recent months with its strawberry breeding programme, having recently started commercial trials of a new, highly productive variety, called Sabrina. According to Mr Pierron-Darbonne, Sabrina has been principally developed to replace the production of older crops that "no longer satisfy the quality demands of European consumers".

The company began the commercial trials of the variety last autumn, with 100,000 plants being tested across Morocco, Huelva in Spain, Italy, California and Michoacán in Mexico.

Mr Pierron-Darbonne anticipates that Planasa will have around 5m plants, or 100ha worth of Sabrina, in production, which will give the company the ability to assess the characteristics and versatility of the new variety.

By 2011/12, Planasa forecasts that it will have the necessary capacity in place to satisfy the anticipated demand from growers for the product.

The company began breeding Sabrina in 2003 following a selection process carried out at Planasa's research facility in Cartaya, Huelva. According to Mr Pierron-Darbonne, the company believes the strawberry will complement its existing Sabrosa-Candonga variety in the market, given the earlier product's earlier harvesting period and greater productivity.

But, while Planasa's managing director admits that Sabrina "does not the same high-end quality" as Sabrosa-Candonga, he says the varieties are equal in terms of its aroma, taste and firmness. Sabina, he continues, is "larger and has a more intense red colour" than Sabrosa-Candonga, while it is also firmer in texture, which "makes it ideal for the fresh and the processing industries".

In this sense, Mr Pierron-Darbonne believes that the two varieties will complement each other well, with Sabrosa-Candonga delivering the quality required for the most demanding markets, while Sabrina produces the volume.

Sabrina, he adds, will be targeted primarily at growers in Morocco that use the Camarosa variety, unlike in Spain and Italy where the strawberry has been replaced by Sabrosa-Candonga. ■