

## HISTORY OF THE PRUNE INDUSTRY IN AUSTRALIA

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Early records of the introduction of prunes to Australia are obscure. Governor PHILLIP is recorded as having collected a range of fruit and berry varieties from the Cape of Good Hope on his voyage to Australia on the first fleet in 1788. However prunes are not specifically listed although they may have been established at that time in South Africa.

There is some confusion concerning the dates when prunes were first grown. The following is an extract from the Agricultural Gazette June 1892 when the Camden Park Orchard of the Macarthurs was awarded first prize in the National Prize Competition 1891 for orchards over ten acres.

*In the orchard is still growing in luxuriant health, the original Prune d'Agen, the famous French dried prune of commerce, imported by Sir William Macarthur, twenty-five years ago. This prune has been extensively propagated at Camden Park until at present there are a large number of trees in bearing in the orchard. The tree seems to thrive excellently in the climate and soil of Camden. The fruit of the tree is chiefly used for drying ; but for that purpose it is the best in the world, and its presence in such numbers at Camden Park cannot fail, sooner or later, to be a great source of wealth to this country.*

This reference indicates the original d'Agen tree was planted at Camden Park in 1866 (approximately 50 km SW of Sydney). A reference in the 1893 Agricultural Gazette mentions the sale of nursery trees and prune growing in the Albury district of N.S.W, in 1861.

Nevertheless it is evident that the first commercial crops were produced by William Macarthur at the Camden Park orchard. Records also indicate that other prune varieties were established prior to the introduction of the d'Agen . For example, « The Catalogue of Plants Cultivated at Camden Park » dated 1857 includes the varieties **Fellenburg (Syn. Italian) and Large Drying** so perhaps these varieties were the ones referred to at Albury.

Prunes were grown successfully at Koorawatha (near Young) at the turn of the century and, in 1901, a crop was harvested from trees planted by the Department of Agriculture at Pera Bore, near Bourke, N.S.W. In the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (M.I.A), prunes were among the first plantings when irrigation began there in 1912.

During the early 1900s there were several prune plantings at Koorawatha and between Koorawatha and Greenthorpe (between Young and Cowra). There were also at least two plantings of Robe de Sergeant prunes along the Temora Road near Young established in 1911 prior to Soldier Settlement.

As indicated previously prunes were grown at Jindera in the Albury district from the mid 1800s but no record exist of these. About 3 plantings remained at Jindera during the 1970s but production ceased in 1982.

Prunes were also included in some First World War soldier settlement blocks at Kunama near Batlow. Although the crop produced well in such a cool climate with an elevation of almost 1.000 metres, the high rainfall was not conducive to sun drying and the industry never developed.

The first sizeable crop in NSW was in 1927 with a recorded production of 1.000 tonnes. The highest production recorded was in 1967 at 5.889 tonnes and the lowest in 1988 at 1854 tonnes.

Over 90 % of Australia's prune production originates in NSW. The only plantings in other States are in South Australia where there are mainly located in the Riverland, Barossa and Clare Valleys. South Australia's production is around 400 dry tonnes. Much of the SA production from the Riverland is exported to SE Asia as sugar plums.

The first plantings in South Australia were made by the Evans family at « Evandale », Kyneton and other early plantings were established at Mexican Vale in the Barossa Valley.

## **THE INDUSTRY AT YOUNG**

Soldier Settlement blocks were planted in the Young district around 1920, at the Kingsvale, Prunevale, Maimuru, Quamby, Waterview and Wirrimah settlements. Each block contained four hectares (ha) of prunes and two ha of pome fruits.

The land was acquired under the **Closer Settlement Act**, from a number of large holdings. The Kingsvale area amounted to about 60 orchard blocks and another 10 at Prunevale, comprising prunes as the main crop plus apples and pears. Of the 29 blocks in the main area, the number of families left by the mid 1940 has dropped to only 16. In 1994 there are only 4 original families of the entire 60 families who are still on their blocks in the Kingsvale area - one at Prunevale and three at Kingsvale - and in each case a grandson of the original settle is managing the property. A similar arrangement existed in the other settlements. A large percentage of the Waterview Settlement plantings comprised Robe de Sergeant prunes.

There was considerable dissatisfaction amongst the growers of the soldier settlements who complained that the blocks were far too small to be a commercial undertaking. As a result the Lands Department conducted an inquiry in the early 1940s and concluded that the allotments were unviable. As there was ample land available, the Department agreed to increase the size of each block.

While most growers were accommodated, the Lands Department felt that there should be the option for a grower who wished to leave and offered them a small monetary compensation and then endeavoured to sell the block to a neighbour. Growers who were considered a poor risk but who wanted to remain were sometimes offered another settlement site. Of the 16 under this category, there were 5 who elected to continue as they were.

While the occupancy of the blocks, particularly the viable ones, tended to be reserved for Returned Servicemen, if a block became available and an ex serviceman was not interested, it became available to the general public.

During the late 1950s the NSW Department of Agriculture approached the Lands Department to review the minimum areas for prunes on the remaining blocks and following negotiations the area was increased to 20 hectares. This move tended to enable growers to consolidate their holding and greatly improved the sale potential of orchards.

The early plantings of prunes at Young were mainly d'Agen, which comprised 75 % of the plantings, and the balance being Robe de Sergeant which were erroneously thought to be necessary as pollinators for the d'Agen. The Robes had a delicate skin and were difficult to dry to a desirable product. As far back as 1937 they were falling from favour and by 1963 a decision was made by cooperative and private packers not to receive further deliveries of this variety. By 1965 a use was found for a small quantity of Robes in a prune spread which utilised the tart flavour of these prunes. Prune plantings in the Young district now total 760 hectares most of which comprise d'Agen.

Almonds were planted as windbreaks around many settlement blocks. Although they grew and produced well, there was difficulty in harvesting and hulling the nuts. This had to be done by hand and was a very tedious job. Most of the almond trees were pulled out or grafted to other fruits in later years but for some growers produced a useful supplementary income.

In the early days, cultivation was encouraged by the Lands Dept. and it became a disgrace to have a blade of grass showing in the orchard. Growers were actually paid by the Government to cultivate orchards and chip trees to control weeds. As this was often the sole means of income this was often carried out unnecessarily. Evidence still exists on most of the blocks of severe erosion caused by this cultivation and by the mid 1940s after a severe drought plantings were in extremely poor condition. Sod culture evolved as a result of the introduction of Trickle Irrigation in the 1960s.

## **THE INDUSTRY IN THE MIA**

Little is recorded concerning the history of the prune industry at Griffith although it commenced with the 1912 plantings following the establishment of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area. Today the MIA is the largest producer of prunes in Australia with plantings totalling 429 hectares which mostly comprise the d'Agen variety.

Initial plantings included the First World War Soldier Settlement scheme when prunes were included in blocks at Corbie Hill near Leeton and at Lake Wyangan near Griffith.

Expansion slowly occurred with many plantings taking place around Yenda, Yoogali and Hanwood. During the 1960s a few new plantings were established in the sandhills near Coleamballa and during the 1980s, two major plantings were made outside the MIA at Darlington Point. It was during the 1980s that the considerable expansion of the industry took place.

At Griffith many growers still operate small dehydrators while a few large growers with modern plants - one which has a French belt dryer - dry fruit of other growers. Griffith Producers Co-Operative operates a large modern drying facility and is also a major processor of dried prunes. The Co-Op has a modern prune juice plant and pitting machines.

## **MECHANICAL HARVESTING**

The first attempts at mechanical harvesting of prune commenced at Young around 1963 using limb shakers and mobile catching frames. This developed rapidly and by the 1970s most growers used some form of mechanical harvesting. A few harvesters were imported from California but most of the mechanical developments took place at Griffith where locally produced mechanics are now widely used.

## **DEHYDRATION**

Designs for a fruit dryer were exhibited by a M. GS Jefferson from California at the 1895 Conference of Vine and Fruit Growers held by the Minister for Mines and Agriculture in Sydney.

Over the years the dehydration procedures have changed considerably. The first method was sun drying which produced a rather variable product. The first dehydrators had boxes with internal trays which were loaded into one end and pushed through the length of the tunnel. Heat was supplied by a wood fire with a flue pipe running the length of the drying chamber and drying was achieved by convection currents from this pipe. The next dehydrators were still wood fired but the air circulation was by means of fans drawing the heated air from the pipes and blowing it over the fruit. There was also the wonderful idea of trucks onto which trays of fruit were stacked and the whole lot travelling on tracks through the drying chambers.

After WWII the onerous task of woods firing was removed with the introduction of oil fired burners. In the late 1950s a new variation in design appeared incorporating parallel flow dehydration with greatly improved efficiency but still mostly oilfired. The next progress in firing was to introduce LP Gas burners giving a much cleaner operation..

Young District Producers operate three units of dehydrators in the district together with a grading and processing plant. Several growers also operate their own dehydrators, some of which are of modern design and used to dry fruit on behalf of other growers.

## **RESEARCH**

Much of the early research into prune growing in NSW was carried out at Wagga Experiment Farm now the site of the Charles Sturt University. Plantings were established at Wagga by the early 1900s. Fruit was mostly sun dried and also dried in a wooden evaporator.

Plantings of prunes were removed around 1971. Small experimental plantings were also located at Cowra Agricultural Research Station which are thought to have been removed in the late 1930s. Extensive research was also carried out at Yanco Agricultural Institute and in the late 1980s at Griffith Horticultural Research Station.

## **INDUSTRY ORGANISATION**

Early records indicate that as early as 1926 there was a Prune Growers Association in NSW and production was estimated at 1.000 dry tons.

In 1927 the NSW Dried Fruits Board was established by Act of Parliament. The Board was originally restricted to dried vine fruits but in 1934 was extended to include prunes and other dried tree fruit. An election of four Board Members is held every three years - two from the vine growing regions and two from the prune growing regions of the MIA and the Young district. Similar Boards exist in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia although the latter does not include prunes.

The main role of the Boards is to register packing houses and dehydrators and to inspect premises to ensure that fruit had been hygienically packed and conforms with quality grades. Until recent years the Board also established grades for local and export sales. More recently inspections have been extended to cover the retail and import areas.

## **MARKETING**

Marketing of prunes during the early years of the industry was chaotic due to price cutting although most packers were members of the Australian Dried Fruits Assn (A.D.F.A). The practice undermined the industry and caused considerable discontent amongst growers and packers.

In September 1989 prune packers withdrew from the ADFA and formed the present major marketing group in Australia of « COUNTRY FOODS ». At present only one packer in South Australia is not a member of Country Foods. Growers are now represented by the Australian Prunes Industry Assn. With only two marketers now in Australia considerable stability exists within the industry and very little price cutting occurs.

Market stability is also assisted by the registration of packing houses by the State Dried Fruits Boards. At present there are 7 registered premises for grading and packing dried prunes in NSW and the only other registered establishment for prunes is one major packing house in South Australia. These premises are regularly inspected by the Boards to ensure that fruit is hygienically packed and complies with the Grade Standards established as Regulations under the Dried Fruits Act. A requirement of the Act is that prunes can only be packed in a registered establishment.

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