



By Mike Knowles

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Fruitbox 50 · Raffaele Benedetti, Unitec



Technology has helped the blueberry trade expand dramatically and it's a trend that looks set to continue

Raffaele Benedetti thinks grading technology could soon be able to pick out the best fruit according to its nutritional qualities, a development that could open the door to products being marketed on the basis of specific health benefits.

"I think the next step will be in this direction," he explains in the latest episode of Fruitbox. "The first step was to select for size and colour, then for defects and soft fruit, and now brix [sugar levels] and acidity. So why not, nutritional content could be something that the market asks for soon."

Benedetti knows better than most the role that technology has played in boosting fruit sales, and especially for example in the recent phenomenal growth in blueberry sales around the world.

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Unitec, suppliers are now able to pick out the best fruit according to a range of different considerations, helping them achieve more consistent quality and grow their business as a result.

For now, says Benedetti, the machinery is going a step further and enabling suppliers to grade their fruit according to taste. For the blueberry business, that could be another game-changer. "What this means is they will not find a bad one in with the good ones, or a super-sweet one in with [more] acidic ones," he explains.

Benedetti suggests that a recent drive towards automation in the field will mean greater demand for technology that can offer better product consistency. "Today, harvesting of blueberries is becoming an issue," he comments. "In the US, they are focused mainly on mechanical harvesting, so today it's very difficult to do different harvests on the same plant. Most of the time, they do one harvest with a

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machine. So it's very important to differentiate the different sizes and internal quality."

Benedetti was taking part in this year's Global Berry Congress, which took place as a virtual event on 10 December. The event attracted more than 550 people from around 45 different countries.

Hosted by Chris White in London, Fruitbox now attracts a big audience across the global fruit and vegetable business that tunes in every week to hear exclusive interviews and expert analysis. Produced by Fruitnet Media International, the show is essential listening for everyone in the fresh produce industry.

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