



January 2011 Feature Story:

“Blackcurrants and Sport Performance: the exciting new breakthrough!”

From champion sharpshooters to share-brokering gurus, computer gamers to global athletes, the Blackcurrant is poised to be the beautiful berry!

Could the next Olympian sharpshooter rifle champion, the winning team in the next Rugby World Cup, the winner of the world's top Computer Games Competition, and a Wall Street trader all have one thing in common?

They could if scientists leading the discovery of special functional food values in Blackcurrants are proven correct. Taking a natural extract from Blackcurrants could improve eyesight focus stamina, improve visual darkness adaption at dawn and dusk, improve blood circulation in body extremities in chill weather conditions, improve mental acuity and especially the ability to make quicker and more correct decisions under stress, and reduce harm from extreme physical exertion.

Following hundreds of years of being the “Grandma colds-and-flu all-purpose tonic berry” from “the bush at the bottom of the garden”, the Blackcurrant is emerging as arguably one of the greatest functional foods the world has ever known.

Scientists and presenters at the Second International Blackcurrant Association Conference held in Beaune, France, this year, tabled the results of pioneering and visionary research.



Mike Fitchett, member of the New Zealand Tall Blacks World Cup Basketball team is an example of the new breed of international athlete using blackcurrants to improve sports recovery in training

Science teams in the UK are investigating the effects of Blackcurrants on mental acuity and the special ability of Blackcurrants to reduce plaque-type formation on neuro connections in the brain. Published trials have already shown taking berry polyphenol will produce better decision-making under stress.

Science teams in Japan and France have focused on the ability of the blackcurrant to improve visual acuity: reducing asthenopia (the eyestrain from fixed focus activity such as during computer games).

Other research teams in Japan have established the ability of blackcurrant extract to improve eyesight in dawn-dusk conditions and also to improve blood circulation in the hand in extreme cold. In New Zealand, science teams have shown that taking blackcurrant extract reduces the negative effects of oxidative stress in muscle tissue associated with extreme physical activity.

Much of this research is in its infancy, but the work to date has been peer-review published and has indicated that increased investment in research and human clinical trials especially should be pursued across these findings. The research signals a tipping point for Blackcurrants with the world's consumer, says International Blackcurrant Association (IBA) President Jim Grierson.

“Berries are emerging as one of the fastest growing health food categories in many countries. Consumers have been seduced by some of the newer varieties that are competing with Blackcurrants but this research is turning consumers back to our blackcurrants.”

“The types of health and functional values being proven are simply extraordinary and yet they are inside a totally natural and pure, safe food. A food that has been known and enjoyed for hundreds of years,” says Grierson.

"We were worried about the diverging focus of the various science teams: some looking at eyesight, some dementia, some sports performance. But then we realised that the results were coming together into a singularity that was stunning. And yet the blackcurrant isn't a drug: it's just a food. All of those potential beneficiaries, from Olympic and World Cup sportspeople to computer games wizzes and even high flying share-brokers, can all be taking the product tomorrow, and benefiting. At the least, they're taking a natural food as part of their regular diet that has exceptional conventional nutritional values, but from the research, they could also be doing something that will bring out the very best in themselves, says Grierson.

"The IBA's central organisation is now working with marketing teams in various countries to get product samples to potential champions. We're ready to walk the talk on these ideas," says Grierson.

Delegates from 18 countries attended the second IBA Conference in Beaune France this year.

In addition to the functional food or nutraceutical science values, the French, UK and Danish teams presented their marketing strategies for up-scaling the Blackcurrant for its culinary values.

France is promoting new culinary uses to new generation consumers under the 'K'sis' brand (a play on the French word for blackcurrants, 'cassis'). The UK Blackcurrant Foundation is pioneering social networking media to develop its promotional base and already very successful website. The Danish Berry Board is repositioning the Blackcurrant within the increasingly popular Scandinavian/Nordic culinary culture.

And in New Zealand a special research relationship between the NZ Blackcurrant industry and government has produced exceptional research results that are now being capitalized on with sophisticated consumer products.

Although the science is focused on Blackcurrant extract its important for the global consumer to know that fresh whole blackcurrants can deliver the same functionality: the extracts are a highly convenient concentration of the natural values and make for ease of use, says Grierson.

Most of the research uses capsules that have the equivalent special antioxidant-polyphenol values of taking around 40 individual blackcurrant berries (two heaped tablespoons), says Grierson. That's an amount easily consumed with cereals, desserts, or in smoothies and the like. But not all Blackcurrants are equal in this regard, some varieties and the growing conditions in some countries, create different potency. A major development will be how some marketers differentiate their blackcurrant product by promoting these levels in the future says Grierson.

That will lead to a new focus by plant breeders and growers as they produce different blackcurrants to suit different market needs.

The global blackcurrant industry produces around 270,000 tonnes of Blackcurrants annually. The two largest producer nations, Russia and Poland produce 70% of that. Russia consumes all of its own and also imports blackcurrants. Poland is the world's largest exporter. Sixteen other countries produce between 500 and 15000 tonnes each annually. China has just started producing its own blackcurrants but the IBA doesn't see Chinese production as a threat to the other producing countries, rather an opportunity, says Grierson.

Strict quality control and quality assurance is increasingly needed as more sophisticated uses are developed. The existing producer countries are better placed to provide this. But the health and functional values being researched are a perfect fit with the Chinese beliefs in natural food-based medicine. As a result China has the potential to be the world's largest 'consumer market' for Blackcurrants, needing much more than it can grow itself.

Blackcurrant production in 2010 looks set to be down by 15%, on average. This is at a time when global stocks are minimal, says Grierson. That should result in a firming of prices to global growers.

Climate change seems to be a major factor for Blackcurrant production. Global warming is an issue for the industry because Blackcurrants need good chilling at key times of the growing cycle. However, plant breeding scientists in the UK, Poland and New Zealand are working together to develop new 'low-chill' breeds.

When we look at all of the consumer food trends, the emerging functional food value in Blackcurrants, and the ability of our global plant breeders and agronomists to upskill both the varieties and the growing systems, the future is looking beautifully black, confirming our positioning as the Blackcurrant being the best berry for life, says Grierson.

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