

Brain benefits of NZ blackcurrants hailed by scientists

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Blackadder blackcurrants improve brain function and treat early symptoms of Parkinsons disease, a new study has found.

New Zealand blackcurrants not only keep our brains young and active, but could replace drugs used to treat depression, anxiety and Parkinsons disease.

A study by Plant & Food Research neuroscientist Dr Arjan Scheepens and his team, found compounds in New Zealand blackcurrants increased cognitive functions, such as memory, and improved mood.

The "Blackadder" blackcurrant variety produced the same results, and reduced the activity of monoamine oxidases enzymes, which work to reduce serotonin and dopamine as the brain ages, Scheepens said.

The "Blackadder" blackcurrant juice had the same effect as pharmaceutical drugs Scheepens said.

"...it turned out it was phenomenally active, and as active as a pharmaceutical drug and I was very surprised."

Three further studies were conducted by the team, all producing the same positive results over the past five years.

Scheepens said the studies had been kept secret while Plant & Food Research tried to patent them.

They were unable to do so, but in the meantime had the study peer reviewed and published in the Journal of Functional Foods.

With scientific credibility gained, they were able to "go public" with the findings.

Scheepens said he was originally tasked to find a component in a New Zealand product with specific, proven health benefits for the brain.

His aim was to find something which mirrored the effects of a long established family of pharmaceuticals used to inhibit monoamine oxidases and improve mood, cognitive behaviours associated with aging and depression.

The team started by testing a range of foods produced in New Zealand but narrowed the search down to berries, and then further to blackcurrants.

"We tested every blackcurrant variety "known to man" and we found the best one by far was the one we grow here in NZ called the Blackadder."

In the study 36 healthy adults between 18 and 35 years old were given a 250ml drink prior to conducting a set of demanding mental performance assessments.

The participants were given either a sugar and taste-matched placebo containing no blackcurrant, an anthocyanin-enriched New Zealand blackcurrant extract or a cold-pressed juice from the New Zealand blackcurrant cultivar 'Blackadder'.

The extract and 'Blackadder' drinks, resulted in improved attention and mood and mental fatigue was reduced.

Additionally, blood tests showed the activity of the monoamine oxidase enzymes strongly decreased after drinking the 'Blackadder' juice.

Scheepens said he would work with the blackcurrant and food industry to further develop a product suitable for export to Japan and China - as those countries were more open to using foods medicinally.

Blackcurrant New Zealand product group manager Anna Tier said New Zealand blackcurrants in general had been found to have high health values in comparison with overseas varieties.

"It is good to see the humble blackcurrant, grown in New Zealand, being recognised."

The Canterbury region contributed the most to the blackcurrant market.

"About 75 per cent to 80 per cent of our commercial growers are based in Canterbury. There are a couple in Southland and Otago, and 15 to 20 per cent are in Nelson," she said.

Tier said there were only 32 growers in the country but they produced about 9000 tonnes of blackcurrants each year.