



Peter and Danise Breederland switched from regular sweet peppers to mini sweet peppers in 2010.

Peter Breederland: “Quest for new challenges”

Canadian pepper grower sells out and looks to Africa for next venture

Peter Breederland exemplifies the spirit of enterprise and adventure. He is always looking for a new challenge. As an illustration, originally from the Netherlands, he was the first Canadian grower to start experimenting with goji berry cultivation. In addition, his company Topgro Greenhouses grows mini sweet peppers. But just before this issue of In Greenhouses was published, we received the news that he has sold his greenhouses.

The company is located at the heart of the Lower Mainland region of British Columbia; the area near the Fraser River, between Vancouver and the city of Hope in the east. “The

mild climate and the high quality of the water make the region perfect for horticulture. There are around 300 hectares of vegetable greenhouses here,” says Peter Breederland. “The only disadvantage is the limited light during the winter months.”

His accent immediately gives away his roots – far from Canada. He was born in Zuidland, a small village in the Netherlands. “I don’t have a horticultural background – my father worked in construction. But he worked on many projects in the Westland region, and I often used to go along with him during my school vacations. This led me to taking on a part-time job at a nursery when I was 14; I picked carnations. In fact, I enjoyed working

in the greenhouse so much that I decided to follow the agricultural education pathway at secondary school in De Lier.”

Investors from Taiwan

Breederland fell in love with travelling while working as an intern at an ornamental plant nursery in Denmark while he was studying. After some years spent working as a teacher at a horticultural education institute and at a tropical plant nursery in the Netherlands, he decided to try his luck outside his home country. He accepted a job as manager of a tropical plant nursery in Cyprus. “I had a fantastic time in Cyprus and that’s also where I met my American wife, Danise.”

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The workforce is mainly sourced from Mexico and Guatemala. The deployment of this labour is strictly regulated.

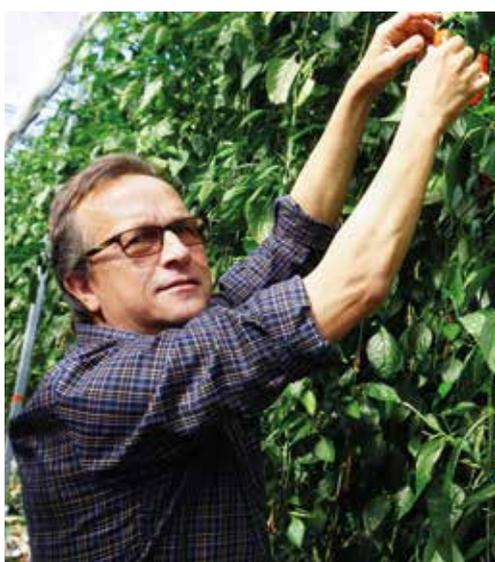
To cut a long story short, the couple married and moved to British Columbia in Canada. He started working as assistant manager at a greenhouse propagation company and later became the general manager. After a few years he was eager for a new challenge, so he looked into the possibilities of starting his own company. "I only had very limited start-up capital of my own, but with the help of some investors from Taiwan I managed to establish my own company, Topgro Greenhouses. In 1993 we bought a 2.5 hectare greenhouse which was only about 18 months old. The company had been growing sweet peppers, so we continued with that."

Switch to mini sweet peppers

Over the years, Breederland acquired the shares held by external parties and the green-

house became a family-run business. The company also rapidly expanded to 4 hectares. "As well as producing sweet peppers, I also propagated vegetable plants to begin with but I stopped doing that in 2005. My customers kept on expanding and needed more plants. But I decided not to expand in line with them as that would have required a big financial injection."

In 2010 the grower also switched from regular sweet peppers to growing mini sweet peppers in red, orange and yellow. "All our peppers are marketed through Windset Farms, one of the major producers and distributors of greenhouse vegetables in North America. At the time, they saw a rising demand for mini peppers and were looking for growers to satisfy that demand. It was an idea that really appealed to me, especially as I am always on



Peter Breederland: "I'm always looking for a new adventure."



Danise Breederland shows the retail packaging for sweet mini peppers.

the lookout for something special, a little out of the ordinary, and because I didn't want to follow the trend of getting bigger and bigger. Growing a speciality product gave me the chance to boost yields without the need to expand. Plus, I could sort and pack the produce myself. A sorting and packaging machine was unprofitable for 4 hectares of regular sweet peppers but it was a different story for a niche product."

Boost to profits

Eight years on, the wisdom of switching to mini peppers has been proven in practice: our profits have significantly improved. The average price of these peppers beats that of regular sweet peppers by a long way, partly because 95 percent are sold for a fixed price in advance. "This increases our margins, even though picking costs are higher. The picking performance you can achieve with mini peppers weighing 65 grams is logically much lower than with regular sweet peppers of 190 grams. We are now the region's major grower of mini sweet peppers, harvesting from mid-March to early December. Our produce is mainly sold by Windset to large American retail chains such as Costco and Superstore."

According to the grower, his ability to realise good returns is also due to the fact that the Canadian market is less fragmented than that in Europe and elsewhere. "There are only a few suppliers of fruit and vegetables in Canada. Market parties are therefore played off against each other less, which results in better prices. In addition, Canadian growers are not allowed to simply expand; your sales channels have to be in place beforehand. This is verified by a marketing commission. This approach does restrict your freedom as an entrepreneur, but on the other hand it contributes to a healthy and stable market. That's very valuable."

Mexico and Guatemala

Breederland's workforce is mainly sourced from Mexico and Guatemala. "People from these countries have been permitted to work in British Columbia for the last ten years. Previously, we had to rely on the local workforce, which doesn't favour agricultural work."

The grower, who employs about 20 Mexicans and Guatemalans, emphasises that the deployment of this labour is strictly regulated. "Mexicans are permitted to work here for up to eight months and must then return to their own country on December 15. The following year they can return to the same employer. Employees from Guatemala are allowed to stay longer. The employer is obliged to pay for the return ticket and provide accommodation; my employees live in housing units on the premises. In general, using labour sourced from Mexico and Guatemala is a great solution; there is sufficient supply and

they are good employees who are not afraid of hard work.”

Pioneer in goji berries

Around eight years ago, he started growing goji berries outdoors in addition to sweet peppers. “Our property is 20 hectares and we only had 4 hectares under glass,” he says. “It seemed a waste not to use the rest of the land. Because of the high investment costs, I didn’t want to build more greenhouses. But I’m always looking for a new adventure. A friend of mine came up with the idea of goji plants. I did some trials and ended up planting 4 hectares with the shrubs. Our second family owned company, called Gojoy Berries Inc. is now the largest grower of this ‘super-food’ in Canada and the USA.”

However, cultivation, and in particular sales, have not been such a smooth process in recent years. As one of few goji berry growers, he has had to master all the technicalities of cultivating the plants himself. “It involved a lot of experimentation, but we seem to have figured it out well now.”

Pick-your-own concept

From the start, picking your own berries was a big hit among Chinese people living in the area. The berries have been consumed in China for years because of their health benefits. They are very important in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). “There is a high percentage of Asians locally, so they are delighted they can get fresh gojis from us. They even arrive at our farm in tour busses. In fact, our pick-your-own concept has become an interesting sales channel for us; 20 percent of our berries are sold this way.”

The rest of the berries are harvested mechanically. The berries are frozen and sold to companies that make smoothies, granola bars and breakfast cereals. “We have also produced goji-based products ourselves under the brand name Gojoy. It is difficult to get new products onto supermarket shelves, and



Gojoy Berries is the largest grower of goji berries in Canada and the USA.

we will be shifting our focus onto supplying the food processing industry with Canadian goji berries in the future. This, together with our U-pick activities, should make the business more profitable.”

From peppers to marijuana

Just before this issue of In Greenhouses was published, Breederland’s story suddenly took a surprising turn: he told us that his greenhouses will be under new ownership as of 1 January 2019. He has sold his greenhouses to a company that grows greenhouse vegetables and bedding plants. “The reason we sold our greenhouses has a lot to do with the recent legalisation of marijuana for recreational use in Canada which was passed on 7 October 2018. This has resulted in a run on existing greenhouses: companies wanting to start growing marijuana don’t have the time to build a new facility. I estimate that there will be more than 60 hectares of greenhouses dedicated to growing marijuana in British Columbia by the end of 2019. Due to this

development, the value of greenhouses has increased by more than 30 percent in eighteen months. Danise and I finally decided to sell our business when we were made this offer. But that’s not the only reason; after 25 years I was ready for a new, different adventure.”

Horticulture is in my DNA

The couple will keep growing the goji berries but want to travel more. “Friends of ours live in Africa and we hope to do volunteer work there. We also want to investigate the options, together with other horticulturalists, of starting a tomato nursery somewhere in Africa. I would enjoy teaching local people how to grow produce and sell their own crops. If I could be involved in a project of that kind, I would aim to visit Africa twice a year to support them, plus provide online advice from here. Local people could be loaned a small start-up sum which would eventually be repaid from the profits generated by the company. In short, horticulture will continue to play a role in our lives: it’s in my DNA!”



Topgro Greenhouses is located in Aldergrove, at the heart of the Lower Mainland region of British Columbia.

Summary

Peter Breederland, born and raised in the Netherlands, started his own horticultural business in British Columbia, Canada, in 1993. First he grew sweet peppers and in 2010 he switched to mini sweet peppers. Eight years ago, he also started growing goji berries outdoors. He is the largest grower of this superfood in Canada and the USA. Just after the interview we received the news that the grower has sold his greenhouses. He is still growing goji berries and hopes to start a tomato growing business in Africa together with local people.