

Panel Script – Genetics Development: How Much Further

Introduction (Moderator)

📄 **Paul Nselel** – Chief Commercial Officer at Fall Creek Nursery & Farm, with nearly 20 years of leadership in the ag industry across companies like Monsanto, AgroFresh, and AgReliant Genetics.

📄 **Pieter Zietsaman** – Berry Business Manager at TopFruit, South Africa, leading licensing and technical support for blueberry breeding programs across Sub-Saharan Africa and globally.

📄 **Daniel Gonçalves** – Agronomy & Applied Research Director for EMEA at Driscoll’s, with a global career advancing sustainable berry production and agronomic innovation.

📄 **Tom Gunther** – Blueberry R&D Manager at Mountain Blue, coordinating international breeding and development of Southern and Northern Highbush varieties.

📄 **Hans Liekens** – Global Head of Innovation at Planasa, bringing 30+ years of experience in consumer-focused leadership roles at multinationals including Tropicana, Chiquita, and Fall Creek.

📄 **Carlos Bonilla** – Global Genetics Product Development Director at Hortifrut, driving innovation in blueberry breeding and varietal development worldwide.

Our topic today is “*Genetics Development: How Much Further.*” In recent years we’ve seen extraordinary advances in blueberry breeding, but the big question remains: how much further can we go? Today, we’ll explore different perspectives—consumer and grower needs, innovation and role of AI, climate change, and future adaptation.

To begin, I’d like to ask a broad opening question to help us position where the industry stands today and where it is heading.

Main Questions (7 Selected)

1. **General vision and future:** Where do you think blueberry genetics stands today? Are we at the beginning of a revolution, in the middle of it, or moving toward maturity? **Speed of development** Traditionally, developing a new variety can take 10–15 years. Is that timeline still acceptable in a world where markets and climates are changing so rapidly?
2. **Consumer vs. grower priorities**
 - What should breeding programs prioritize: consumer traits (flavor, texture, size, shelf life) or grower traits (yield, adaptability, resistance)? Can those priorities always align? Will the genetics of the future be more about creating a “superior fruit” or about ensuring survival under stress?
3. **AI, Biotechnology and new tools**
 - What role should AI and tools like CRISPR or genomic selection play in accelerating breeding? Should the industry adopt them more openly?
4. **Climate change**
 - How prepared are breeding programs to deliver varieties that can perform under extreme conditions—heat, drought, unpredictable seasons? We heard it should get warmer.

5. **Consumption and category management:** If you look to other crops (potatoes, carrots, tomatoes – see below) there the categories were developed by the breeding companies. We have the same opportunities in blueberries
 6. **Competition and collaboration**
 - With multiple breeding houses competing, is there still room for collaboration in innovation, or will competition always dominate?
 7. **Future consumer experience**
 - Looking 10–15 years ahead, what will the blueberry eating experience look like? Will we see radical changes in flavor profiles and berry size, or are we already close to the “ideal blueberry”?
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Backup Questions

- How can we balance premium, restricted-access varieties with the need for broader adoption to expand the global market?
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Suggested Moderator Transitions

- **After the first round (vision):**

“Thank you for sharing those perspectives. Now that we’ve framed where we stand, let’s move into a key issue: the balance between consumer demands and grower needs.”
- **From consumer to speed of development:**

“Once we define who we are breeding for, the next question is timing. Can we innovate fast enough to meet those expectations?”
- **From speed to AI biotechnology:**

“And when we talk about speed, naturally new technologies come into play. I’d like to hear your thoughts on the role they should play in this race.”
- **From biotechnology to climate change:**

“Of course, innovation doesn’t happen in a vacuum—we face the pressing challenge of climate change. How is breeding preparing to face that reality?”
- **From climate change to exclusivity/access:**

“On the market side, many new varieties are exclusive or club-based. How do we balance the need for differentiation with the need to grow global consumption?”
- **Closing with future consumer:**

“And finally, let’s look ahead: what will the blueberry eating experience be like 10 or 15 years from now? What is the next frontier in genetics?”