

City that produces some of China's best tobacco explores healthier industries and finds its climate ideal for this fruit

By **WANG HAO, YANG FEIYUE** and **LI YINGQING** in Qujing, Yunnan

Xu Huayuan uses secateurs to trim blueberry trees in a vast plantation in Southwest China's Yunnan province.

"You can try one of the blueberries that have turned dark blue on the trees. They are sweet," said the 32-year-old.

Xu is a contract worker on a blueberry plantation in the Qilin district of Qujing city, which is owned by Joyvio Group, the strategic investment arm for food and agribusiness of Legend Holdings.

Along with seven others, he has been working at the 73-hectare plantation for a year, caring for its 240,000 blueberry trees.

His work includes keeping a record of the development of each blueberry tree in the area of the farm he is responsible for, monitoring the changes in temperature and water content on a daily basis.

"My life is much easier and more stable now than it used to be," said Xu, who used to grow tobacco on his 0.7 hectares of land. "I had to dig into my own pockets to buy pesticide and fertilizer, do all the heavy lifting during the harvest, and find buyers," he said.

His family could make as much as 30,000 yuan (\$4,500) if there was a good harvest, but would lose it all if the weather was bad.

The city produces among the best tobacco nationwide, and its output accounts for about 9 percent of the total nationwide.

"Tobacco is still a pillar industry. But we are trying to make other sectors, like organic farming, vacation and sport tourism, take up a larger proportion, so that the industrial mix would be healthier too. Blueberries are our new hope," said Dong Baotong, the mayor of Qujing.

Qujing is going all out to upgrade its economic development and industry structure, said Dong. Coal production has been halved compared with its peak period, steel capacity has been reduced, obsolete production equipment eliminated, and the local government is now striving to develop modern plateau agriculture.

As part of this initiative, the local government enticed the Joyvio Group to develop its blueberry farms in Qujing in October 2014.

"We had experts determine whether the local climatic conditions were suitable for growing blueberries and offered a series of support measures for the company to settle here," said Zhang Zhen, a senior official with the



Xu Huayuan works on a blueberry plantation in Qujing, Southwest China's Yunnan province. The fruits are offering new hope for local farmers like Xu to lead a better life. PHOTOS BY WANG JING / CHINA DAILY

Blueberry plants 'new hope'



Qilin district government.

The local climate and slightly acidic soil turned out to be ideal for growing blueberries, which ripen and appear in the market four to five months earlier than in some other parts of the country.

The Qilin government has also spent 12 million yuan to build roads, greenhouses and refrigerated warehouses, and provides the company with an annual subsidy of 1 million yuan.

In addition, local government representatives went from door to door to introduce the local farmers to the benefits of blueberry plantations and

encourage them to provide some of their land and work for the company, according to Zhang.

As a result, more than 500 households agreed to lease some of their land to the company.

"Most of the land being leased was mainly used to grow corn and tobacco before," said He Chongyun, an official with the village where Joyvio is located.

The local farmers could make roughly 2,000 yuan in profit per mu (0.07 hectare) of land in the past if they grew tobacco, a few hundred if they planted corn, He said.

But now, they get 1,200 yuan for

each mu of land they rent out, and the 100 local farmers who have become long-term employees of Joyvio can make 30,000-40,000 yuan a year, and those who work part time 70-100 yuan a day, based on their responsibilities. During harvest season, the Joyvio facility needs more than 400 temporary workers to help.

"Moreover, the locals can help with the plantation whenever they have time, because their homes are close by," He said.

To date, Joyvio has also invested more than 400 million yuan in its blueberry plantations in Qujing and developed a standard blueberry cultivation demonstration area, a research and development facility, a seedling breeding base, a cold chain center and a recreational fruit-picking garden.

A seamless and transparent traceability system from cultivation to sales has taken shape.

So far, the company has established 667 hectares of blueberry plantations in Qujing, which has enabled local farmers to earn 5.8 million yuan from leasing their land to the company and 9 million yuan from working on the plantations.

Qujing's blueberry growing potential has also attracted the attention of the International Blueberry Organization, which co-hosted an inter-

national blueberry conference in Qujing in early September to introduce the city to potential investors.

"I've talked to five enterprises specializing in cold chains, financing and agricultural equipment, which can help us to develop the industry upstream and downstream," said Cui Xingguo, general manager of Joyvio Qujing Agriculture Co.

Joyvio will continue to work with rural cooperatives and capital funds, introduce new blueberry species, standardize blueberry growth practices and expand blueberry production in the future, Cui said.

The Qilin district alone has its sights set on developing a 2,000-hectare blueberry industry belt over the next five years, with the goal of producing 30,000 tons of quality blueberries and more than 3 billion yuan in output value.

Xu the contract worker is content to look after his blueberry trees, but he still has 0.4 hectares of land on which his family grows tobacco.

The company has taught him certain blueberry plantation techniques, but some things remain difficult.

"There's still a lot for me to learn. But hopefully I can learn all it takes to grow blueberries on my own land one day," Xu said.

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