



Industry Overview: New Brunswick Wild Blueberries

In New Brunswick, wild blueberries have been harvested commercially from native stands for more than sixty years. Approximately 13 million kg are harvested annually. There are about 11,300 hectares in wild blueberries in NB, with approximately half of the area harvested each year. Over three hundred farm families are involved in wild blueberry production and 95 % of these farms are located in the coastal regions, where the plant occurs naturally, and where the moderating effect of the ocean reduces the risk of frost. The production is split among three major growing regions: (a) the counties of Charlotte and Kings (20%); (b) the Acadian Peninsula and Kent County (70%); and (c) the Southeast region (10%).



Industry Profile

The global wild blueberry industry is confined to northeastern North America. Approximately 95 million kg of wild blueberries are produced annually, and half of the production occurs in Canada (in the Atlantic Provinces, the Lac St-Jean region and the Northern shore of Quebec). The markets for the Canadian crop are approximately 20% domestic and 80% international.

New Brunswick produces 25% of Canada's total production (12% of the industry's total). With potatoes, this is one of the few NB agricultural commodities whose primary market focus is global. The farm gate value of the crop is generally in the vicinity of 20 million dollars. The crop is considered an excellent way to diversify the coastal economies, where it was traditionally based on fisheries.

Production Characteristics

Over 99% of the crop is being produced on land where the blueberry plant grows wild. Land is brought into production by clearing the wood from the forests in which the wild blueberry plant occupies the understory.

Canada's native peoples used wild blueberries fresh and dried. By the time Europeans colonized Atlantic Canada, the region's native people were burning wild blueberry fields periodically to

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rejuvenate the stands. Modern wild blueberry management consists of a two year cycle. In the fall of the second (or crop) year, or in the spring of the first (or sprout) year, the fields are pruned. Traditionally, this pruning has been performed by burning the fields with straw or tractor-driven oil burners. However, with the recent oil prices, growers only periodically burn fields. Pruning with the use of a flail mower is the most common practice.

Pruning is done in order to rejuvenate the stand, and it results in an outgrowth of new shoots from the rhizomes. The rhizome is the equivalent of an underground stem that forms a dense network in the soil. Periodically pruning by fire is beneficial in reducing the presence of diseases, insects and some weeds. Most growers use a selective herbicide at this time of year in order to reduce competition by weeds.

After pruning, the new sprouts emerge in the spring and grow all summer. Flower buds begin to develop in mid summer. Fruits are produced in the second year of the production cycle. In the fall of the first year, the fields are a blaze of colour, reflecting the fact that wild blueberry fields consist of several hundred varieties (or clones) of wild blueberry plants. Once the sprouts have gone through the winter, flowers begin to develop in late May. It is beneficial to introduce pollinators in order to pollinate the flowers.

The crop is generally harvested during the last three weeks of August. Most of the New Brunswick crop is picked mechanically, and the remainder is picked by semi mechanical means or manually. After harvest, the two year cycle begins again.

Market Channels

After harvest, the berries are either packed and sold fresh (5% of the crop) or trucked to freezing plants located in the province, Québec, Nova Scotia, PEI and Maine where they are washed, graded and frozen (95% of the crop). These channels involve growers, buyers, processors and manufacturers. The largest markets for wild blueberries are industrial, hospitality and institutional markets (i.e., hotels, restaurants, institutions). The fruit is has high content of anti-oxidant and other beneficial properties and as such, opportunities have emerged in nutraceuticals and health markets.

Marketing and Promotion

The Wild Blueberry Association of North America (WBANA) is a common promotional arm for the whole industry. The efforts of WBANA and its members have kept markets in sync with a doubling of production in the past decade or so. The efforts of the industry are directed at differentiating this fruit from the cultivated (highbush) blueberry, a fruit which has a level of production similar to that of wild blueberries, and which is its principal competitor on world markets. Efforts are also aimed at distinguishing the wild blueberry from other fruits which might be considered substitutes. The berries benefit from a real and positive association with the term “wild”, which imparts a sense of “nature” and “wholesome”. Despite the fact that species of wild plants similar to wild blueberries could be exploited in northern Europe, tradition, the economies of scale and the technological sophistication which have been achieved in Canada and the US make that situation unlikely in the short and medium term.

The use of wild blueberries is enjoying rapid uptake in an increasingly wide use of products (cereals, beverages, concentrates and nutraceuticals products), over and above its traditional use in baked goods, yogurts and jellies. Vigilance in new product development, aggressive promotion and the further globalization of trade could spell a good future for the crop.

Future Industry Trends

Important technological development has doubled wild blueberry production in the past decade. The processors, in conjunction with WBANA, have managed to keep demand in sync with the burgeoning production. In the future, the industry will face many challenges such as the increasing land development for cultivated blueberries and pollination requirement. This poses huge challenges for the growers and the rest of the industry in seeking to remain cost-competitive while seeking additional users and uses for the crop.



Technology like land levelling has changed the economics of wild blueberry production.

Industry Profile:

Who is involved?	
Wild blueberry growers	Beekeepers
Processors	Research and extension workers
Rakers	Marketing/ promotion agents
Machinery operators and field workers for crop maintenance	Fertilizer/ pesticide/ farm machinery agents
Agricultural technicians	Accountants/lawyers/bankers.

Who are the Contacts?

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