

THE LATEST HIT: BLUEBERRIES GONE WILD

Are field-grown, cross-pollinated, sprayed and mechanically picked blueberries really 'wild'?

PAMELA CUTHBERT | September 10, 2007 |

All wild blueberries are not created equal. For one, take their "untamed" habitats. In Ontario, the little indigo-stained fruits are at the heart of a fleeting summer cottage industry, hand-raked on forest floors or rocky beds and brought fresh to market by gatherers. But in the wild blueberry belt, which runs from Quebec through Eastern Canada and down into Maine, the picture is generally less savage: the same species of the pea-sized berry is cultivated on vast, cleared fields, cross-pollinated with the help of imported bees, sprayed with chemicals when necessary, mechanically harvested to an average yield of 80,000 tonnes a year, frozen and then, for the most part, exported. The numbers tell it all. The harvest has increased by 450 per cent in the past 25 years, since the Wild Blueberry Association of North America started keeping records. Mother Nature has had a helping hand: growers long ago discovered that the sweet-sour fruit can maintain its wild roots while conforming to cultivation.

Native to North America, the lowbush blueberry grows through an underground network that is boosted by either mechanical mowing or the scorching effects of a fire. In A Taste of Quebec, Julian Armstrong discovers the berries "aren't really wild; growers explain they encourage the wild plants by setting fire to the blueberry fields each spring." But technically, because the species is the same wild one, *Vaccinium angustifolium*, and the fields are neither seeded nor planted, they can still be called wild.

Attempts to grow wild blueberries from seed have failed, but that hasn't stopped the expansion of the industry through a system of management that looks a lot like agriculture. David Hoffman is co-CEO of Nova Scotia-based Oxford Frozen Foods, the world's biggest processor of wild blueberries. He says that farming the biennial crop "is fairly technical." There is precise timing for introducing the bees to maximize cross-pollination, a need for early detection of signs of blight, which can ruin the crop, and careful measure of fertilizer applied.

Orv Pulsifer, also of Nova Scotia, is promoting a less intrusive approach: a certified organic alternative. He counts to date about a dozen producers in his group, a yield of just a few tonnes a year and a demand that far exceeds supply. "The market could be international, and we can't even cover the trade for Atlantic Canada." But it's challenging to meet the requirements of organic certification, get a healthy yield and not break your back in the process. "It's very labour-intensive," he says. "We try to have a field clear enough to use a mechanical harvester, but if you can't get that you have to do hand raking." He estimates they get less than half of a conventional harvest, but it's still a boon with as much as a 50 per cent premium at the register.

Anne Freeman is the manager of Dufferin Grove farmers' market in Toronto. She has picked "authentic" wild blueberries in the backwoods of Ontario and has eaten the "cultivated" wild ones by the handful in Eastern Canada. "I wish I could say they taste different, but I can't." WBANA head Neri Vautour concurs. Comparing the taste of the wild-cultivated and the authentic wild, he says, "I don't think a person could tell the difference." That's good news, especially given this year's severe shortage in Ontario due to lack of rainfall. "I've never seen a year when they were this expensive," says Toronto baker Gay Couillard. The price for locally sourced is \$7 per pint and the supply is scarce. Couillard is planning a dessert for a big public event in the autumn and might have to count on the goods from Quebec or Down East for her blueberry and lemon cream tarts. Either way, she wants wild ones, not the cultivated highbush berries, which are larger with a globular shape, comparatively watery in texture and have a lighter, violet colour.

Ultimately, it's not taste but a fad for nutraceuticals and the trendy blueberry diet that are driving up the market for wild. "The biggest selling feature are the health benefits," says Hoffman. The fact that the wild species is smaller and contains more skin per pound than the highbush variety is key: the perception is the antioxidants are concentrated in the skin. Canada's natives, of course, knew all of this long ago: blueberries were traditionally a highly prized part of their diet and considered a tonic to purify the body.