

# Go Wild! Enjoy all the Wild Blueberry Harvest Has to Offer



Canadian Idol runner-up Mitch MacDonald performed atop the Marigold Centre in Truro during the opening kick-off to the Nova Scotia Wild Blueberry Festival. Hundreds of events were held throughout the province from August 14-29. (Harrington Photo)



A sea of blue. Mechanized harvest is much faster than traditional hand raking. Thousands of pounds of wild blueberries can be picked each day, using a tractor, harvester and two operators. (Harrington Photo)



Jenna Slack is all smiles as she pulls another load of berries over to the scales. Pallets full of wild blueberries are piled high, prior to shipping, at the Slack Farms Ltd. receiving shed. (Harrington Photo)



Gordon Slack has been in the blueberry business for 55 years. At 77 years young he is still helping out at Slack Farms Ltd. on Middle Road, Debert. Granddaughter Jenna Slack is helping her grandfather unload a truck of wild blueberries. (Harrington Photo)

By Linda Harrington

There are only three areas in the world where wild blueberries grow naturally. These include Quebec, Maine and areas across Atlantic Canada. Nova Scotia produces over 40 million pounds each year, making the wild blueberry the number one fruit crop in acreage, export sales and value. These tiny bursts of blue are exported to the United States, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom and other countries.

The local harvest began on August 13th, about an average start to the late summer season. An intense heat wave hit the province just as harvest began

with temperatures hitting in the mid thirties. This was hard on those trying to put in long days harvesting the berries but it has been a boost to the berries themselves.

The rather cool wet summer had slowed overall maturity of the fruit but they were coming on strong once the heat began warming the soil. It was hoped that a few showers would keep the berries at their peak for a few more weeks.

The crop appeared to be average in production but Dave Sangster, General Manager at the Wild Blueberry Producers Association, said that it would take a few weeks to get a real feel.

Producers always keep

their eyes and ears on news from the harvest south of the border. Harvests in Maine begin a bit earlier and yields reflect how markets will respond. So far Maine appeared to have an average crop (usually around 80 million pounds) and having just talked to producers in Quebec, Mr. Sangster said they were looking at strong average crops, also.

The Nova Scotia Wild Blueberry Harvest Festival was held throughout Nova Scotia from August 14th to the 29th. Events featuring Nova Scotia's Provincial berry included information sessions, suppers, musical celebrations and much more.

The wild blueberry is a powerful antioxidant, source of fiber and vitamin C. Many restaurants use this flavorful berry in their favorite recipes. Homemade blueberry pie continues to be a popular choice among pie eaters.

Enjoy the wild blueberry freshly harvested throughout the month of August. The berries freeze well and can be enjoyed all year round, too.

"The wild blueberry is now recognized and enjoyed by consumers world wide," says Dave Sangster. "The crop is a major contributor to the provincial economy. Everyone should enjoy the health benefits of the wild blueberry. They are good for you!"

## Lower Wild Blueberry Prices Leaves Producers Feeling Rather Blue

By Linda Harrington

Wild blueberry growers had been enjoying a few years of higher than normal profits, when prices soared to over a \$1/ pound. Producers haven't had much to smile about this year, as rumors circulate of prices hitting a low of only 35 cents/pound, for berries going to processing.

Dave Sangster, General Manager at the Wild Blueberry Producers Association, says he is aware of the 35 cent price rumor. "There is always the possibility for a price adjustment at a later date, but we never know for certain," he says.

The low price expectation has caused some local producers, those with low yielding fields, to leave their berry crops unharvested.

Several fields have been hit hard by wildlife damage from deer, rabbits and even bear. "There are fields that have

had eight or ten deer move in and wipe out most of the whole crop," says Gordon Slack of Slack Farms Ltd., "There is no sense even putting a harvester in those fields this year."

Harvest costs are directly related to yield. On fields with low yields the producer will pay more to have their crop picked. At the low price of 35cents/pound there may not be any profit realized for the producer after the expenses are paid. Some could even suffer a loss once all the bills are added up.

Peter Rideout, Planning and Development Officer with the Dept. of Agriculture, tired to explain some of the reasons for the reduced price when he spoke at the local Blueberry Field Day on August 2nd. Mr. Rideout says there are multiple factors involved but they all relate to the fact that up until about a year ago the

demand for wild blueberries exceeded the supply. This was the main reason producers were receiving record high prices.

This demand has been substantially reduced in the last year, one reason being that about 50% more cultivated blueberries have been injected into the frozen fruit inventory. The cultivated blueberry is usually a fresh market product, with only the 2nd grade berry going into this frozen ingredient market. By contrast only about 5% of wild blueberries are used for the fresh market. The largest percentage of wild blueberries are frozen at harvest and sold world wide as industrial food ingredients.

The world wide food ingredient market has been hit hard by the slowdown in the economy. Japan has been one of the hardest hit countries and in past years they have purchased 30 million pounds of wild blueberries. Last year this number dropped to a low of 10 million pounds.

Mr. Rideout is optimistic that demand will start to increase, especially as we start to see positive economic

news. "We have established a foundation for long term business relationships and there will be great opportunities to rebuild this market once the economy recovers. Our business relationships are still there."

He also says that the wild blueberry industry has invested highly in the technology needed for the food ingredient market. "The wild blueberries offered are at a very high standard," he says, "And wild blueberries are very popular with the consumer."

Mr. Rideout says that there was recently good news being reported from the cultivated blueberry market in the US and British Columbia, "There is a larger percentage of the cultivated berries going to the fresh market this year." This has the potential to reduce the percentage going into the frozen ingredient market.

A Japanese delegation, who are interested in wild blueberries, were touring the area on August 20th. Mr. Rideout accompanied the group as they visited the Oxford processing facilities and made a stop to view a retail site at the Masstown Market.



Marg Gregory performs some quality control tests on wild blueberries being shipped through C.L. Stonehouse Enterprises in Debert. (Harrington Photo)

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