



Charles Harringtons checks on the quality of wild blueberries filling up the bins. This is the first year he has harvested these 12 acres berry fields with his own machinery. Back in the 70's Charles was one of the local teenagers picking them using hand rakes.

Charles Gets Own Harvester

By Linda Harrington

More and more businesses are facing labour shortages in post-CERB times, something farmers have been facing for a number of years.

August used to be the month when teenagers headed to the blueberry fields, dreaming of spending their hard-earned fortune on trendy clothes for back to school, fun times at the Exhibition or their first set of wheels. Long hot days slinging a hand rake, sneaking the best berries from under the roped off area, dumping berries into pail after pail resulted in a sizable first pay cheque for those willing to work hard.

Times changed! Teenagers found other jobs and raking crews were replaced by automated pickers. One tractor with a harvester required just two people instead of a dozen rakers. Metal pails were replaced by plastic boxes able to hold an average of 25-30lbs of berries. Each box had to be handled by the worker on back, eventually loaded onto a truck and then unloaded onto pallets at the receiving shed.

Times changed! It was hard to find workers willing to stand on the back of a picker for 12 hours a day, handling 30lb box after box in the hot summer sun. These boxes required a great deal of handling! From the field, then to the receiving shed and finally to the processor. They have been replaced by 60 lb plastic bins which can hold 250- 300 lbs of berries and the worker on the back has been replaced by a bin loader and second tractor.

Charles Harrington grew

up in Glenholme like many teenagers, heading to the berry field each August. He helped his father clear family blueberry land from the time he was old enough to carry a chain saw. After Hurricane Juan flattened his woodlot, he began to clear acres of his own wild blueberry fields. When Charles took over the family blueberry fields, local kids still wanted to rake but within a few years the lack of crews left berry crops unharvested in the fields. Even when harvesters became more popular, it was hard to get someone to come to your field right when your crop was ready to pick.

Eventually, a friend bought his own harvester and agreed to pick the fields. Charles had three sons, who each worked on the back of the harvester for their first summer jobs and once they moved on, and it became hard to find someone, Charles himself spent many summers on the back.

Replacing simple hand rakes and buckets with mechanization was a huge cost outlay for farmers but with good prices there was still room for profit. Then prices began fluctuating from a high of over a \$1/lb to a few years of low prices leaving farmers in the red at the end of the year. Many of those with smaller acreage decided it was time to get out of the blueberry business.

The last few years receiving sheds began to put the word out they would soon not accept the small boxes. This would mean more financial investments for wild blueberry farmers. Even if you already



The new bins hold between 250-300lbs resulting in a lot less handling for today's wild blueberry harvest.

had a harvester, they would have to be retrofitted to attach a bin loader and you would need a second tractor to load the 300lb bins. The government offered grants for a couple years to help with the

conversion but some farmers just simply didn't have the money required to invest.

For Charles, the post Juan blueberry lands were just now starting to produce berries, doubling the acreage needing



Loading berries as the sun sets! A second tractor is required to move the filled bins around the field and onto trailers or trucks to be transported to the receiving sheds.

to be harvested. This meant a big financial decision...buy the gear needed to carry on independently or get out of the business. A tough choice to make after investing over forty years of your life in the blueberry lands located in your back yard. He was fortunate to find a good used tractor, harvester and bin loader for sale. With rumors the price might be good this year, he made the purchase knowing it will be

years before recouping the investment but hoping there are some good crops and prices in the years to come.

2021 has been one of the hottest harvest years on record, so Charles is thankful he is in an air-conditioned cab and not slinging a blueberry rake in the sweltering field. The days can still be long and lonely. There was a lot of fun had by those teenage berry raking crews in times gone by!



Hand rakes have been replaced by harvesters in the wild blueberry fields but the concept of metal teeth gently pulling the berries from the vines is similar. Charles checks over the "teeth" to make sure none are bent or broken.

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