

Life *in the* Valley

sanews@salem.gannett.com

Oregon blueberry yield topples records, expands overseas

JUNNELLE HOGEN
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As local farmers, field hands and migrant workers toiled in the fields this summer picking blueberries, several recounted a “berry glut. Blueberry supply seemed to outpace demand, in a competitive market where farmers vie for U-pick stand attention and both domestic and international markets.

Early this September, the Oregon Blueberry Commission added weight to first-hand recounts: The council estimates more than 100 million pounds of commercial blueberries have been harvested across this Oregon this summer, a figure higher than any prior yields.

“Generally there has been a steady progression for the last 20 years,” said Brian Ostlund, with the commission. “Light pollination, plants reaching maturity -- we’re seeing higher and higher yields.”

Life of the blueberry

A blueberry grown in the Willamette Valley faces a Russian roulette of life cycles.

The standard commercial blueberry starts its journey with water from wells and sprinklers, dousing them in the heat of the early spring. By May and early June, several early varieties mature, followed by other varieties all the way until October.

Laborers toil in the fields, hand-picking most of the fruit destined for fresh fruit markets. They are sold through companies, farmers markets, and U-pick stands, which line the roads for eager consumers.

Machines whirl and collect the berries for frozen fruit production, often before the berries are fully ripe. The farmers hand them off to food processors, such as Norpac, which process the berries on conveyor belts and seal them in airtight bags.

The berries are sold to Costco, and to other large commercial outlets. Many travel around the world, taking advantage of Oregon’s market share in blueberry production with South Korea.

Markets in flux

After decades of negotiations, the Oregon Blueberry Commission expanded international trade in 2011, allowing shipping to North Korea, one of the most consistent large markets for blueberries in Asia. Now, five packers are registered participants in the Korea export program, including Salem-based Pan American Berry Growers, but several local farms and processors say with a saturation of fruit, they are seeing a shifting climate.

“Korea was really strong a couple years ago, but it has steadied,” said Dave Dunn, the general manager of packaging and bulk producing company Willamette Valley Fruit Co.

The company still inadvertently filters blueberries to international markets, after selling to resellers and brokers.

Local blueberry grower Marty Nanneman is trying to keep it local. He processed one-third of his blueberry crop, about 80,000 pounds of blueberries, with Willamette Valley Fruit Co., for frozen packaging, and sold the rest fresh, between a fruit stand and several companies in Bend and Eugene.

Pat Zurbrugg, of Zurbrugg Blueberries in Silverton, works with Washington-based processor Columbia Fruit. While his market is still local, he is exploring international markets through the processor.

Most of the more than 100,000 pounds of blueberries his farm has



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You-pick stands are one of several ways local berry farmers market their fruit.

gathered this year were sold through U-pick and a local fresh market company.

Behind the record yields: Mild heat, maturing plants

Not all local farmers share in record crops. But several say they saw it coming.

“We had many days over 90 in 2015,” said Nanneman. “This year, for most of the summer, we swung the pendulum.”

While two days of over-100 temperatures broke local heat records in early August, the governor and county never had to declare a drought emergency, as was the case last year.

Statewide, the commission reports many blueberry growers got an even

earlier start to their early varieties, around May or early June, and finished the growing season one to two weeks earlier, with higher yields.

Several local farmers say their late varieties finished producing in August, instead of September to early October. While the blueberry commission still sees a trickling of late arrivals, it has slowed nearly to a halt by early September, said Ostlund. However, the high yield might have more to do with maturing plants that are producing more plants than mild climates.

“Blueberries were on a rocket ship upwards for so many years, with new dietary programs, clean eating, that fueled their rapid growth,” said Ostlund. “People started saying, ‘If a little is good, a lot must be better.’”

While the commission has yet to tally the final results the last record blueberry intake was in 2015, 96 pounds of commercial blueberries, meaning the new record would have increased by at least 4 percent statewide.

“It’s not necessarily that we had such a tremendous yield,” said Nanneman. “In the last 10 years, people that have been planing blueberries large scale. Acreages are just coming into full production.”

There are three main types of blueberries, with assorted varieties, but it takes three to four years for blueberries to produce fruit, and even longer

for them to produce the maximum they can.

“Blueberries were so popular and strong demand, there were a lot of plantings,” said Dunn. “Globally, we’ve reached that point where the market outpaces supply.”

Several farmers say this year, they have had difficulty working with more companies, or selling enough of their yields, due to a market glut.

“I think we’re producing more blueberries than people can eat,” Nanneman said.

Producing in the new age

The increase in production may not be all good news, but several farmers say they have been more challenged to stay at the top of their blueberry-growing game.

Instead of picking blueberries for the fresh market by hand and using machines for the berries to be processed for frozen food, Zurbrugg and several other local area farmers are now gathering their blueberries entirely by machine picking.

“Because of the labor costs, we can’t afford to hand pick anymore,” said Zurbrugg, who still hires two to three people during the busy summer months just to harvest what he has.

Nanneman goes to the dire opposite, letting the fruit sit out longer and gather more sugar, in the hopes of enticing a local following for his fresh fruit.

“The people who sell, who end up in grocery stores in LA, Japan, Costco -- they have to pick seven to 10 days earlier than I do, because the berries have to be much firmer,” Nanneman said. “We have a very good retail following for our handpicked fruit.”

The Oregon Blueberry Commission is now looking to new markets in Vietnam and the Philippines to expand international blueberry sales, as they anticipate a continued, steady growth of the local fruit yield. Meanwhile, Japan and Singapore remain steady markets and the commission is trying to open up sales in a new Asia market: China.

Ostlund said the future is bound to get more and more competitive.

“We’ll have to see how the supply of labor is going to be in the foreseeable future, what demands will be placed on the farmers, whether they’ll be able to sell all their fruit,” Ostlund said.

Zurbrugg said for folks like him, selling local, the challenge in the foreseeable future is staying in the game.

“I just hope I can keep selling them myself,” Zurbrugg said.



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Ginger Murphy, the owner of Sunnyview Blueberry Farm, walks through rows of blueberry plants in Salem.