



Photos by George Plaven/Capital Press
Doug Krahmer, president of Berries Northwest, walks between rows of organic blueberries during a harvest at a farm near Albany.

Northwest’s blueberry growing dominance creates challenges

By **GEORGE PLAVER**
Capital Press

ALBANY — On a seasonably warm July afternoon in the fertile Willamette Valley, Doug Krahmer stood between rows of organic blueberries and watched as a large mechanical harvester rolled slowly through the field, rattling bushes heavy with ripe fruit.

Measuring a little more than 15 feet tall, 11 feet wide and weighing 7 tons, the harvester seemingly floated in the distance over neat rows while fiberglass rods, or “fingers,” shook the berries onto a conveyor belt that swooped them to the upper deck and into plastic crates.

From there, the crates were loaded into refrigerated trucks and driven from the farm north of Albany to a packing shed east of Portland.

Krahmer popped a berry in his mouth, reflecting on what he said has been a fairly decent growing season.

“Weather-wise, it’s been OK,” said Krahmer, president of Berries Northwest. “It’s getting hot now, but we’re past that critical point.”

Twenty years ago, blueberries were a niche crop in Oregon and along the West Coast. Most U.S. production came from states such as Michigan and New Jersey. Now the Northwest is the world’s dominant blueberry-growing region, posing new opportunities and challenges for the region’s growers.

Krahmer, 64, began farming 35 acres of blueberries with his father-in-law in 1980. Then, he said, total



Krahmer holds ripe organic blueberries ready to harvest at his company’s orchard in Albany.

production nationwide was between 125 million and 150 million pounds.

This year, Oregon alone is expected to break the 160 million-pound mark and Washington state is projecting a crop of 165 million pounds. The two states have gone back and forth in recent years as the country’s top blueberry producers by volume. Blueberries are Oregon’s ninth-most valuable agricultural commodity, at more than \$180 million in 2018.

Berries Northwest now grows 420 acres of conventional and organic blueberries from the Willamette Valley to the Columbia River, including fresh fruit sold to Driscoll’s, a major brand based in Watsonville, California. With the mid-season harvest well underway, Krahmer said it is full speed ahead bringing the crop to market.

“We go from zero to 100 mph in about three days,” he said. “You better have your seat belt fastened.”

As the industry continues to expand, experts say blueberries are gaining popularity. However, factors such as higher labor costs and more foreign competition

are simultaneously squeezing prices, forcing businesses to innovate to stay competitive.

Bryan Ostlund, executive director of the Oregon Blueberry Commission, said the rise of Northwest blueberries has been “just this rocket ship ride up.”

In 2009, Oregon farmers harvested 47.2 million pounds of blueberries, split between the fresh and processed markets. Since then, production has more than tripled, hitting a record 153.1 million pounds in 2019.

The reason, Ostlund said, begins with marketing. As consumers became more aware of the health benefits of blueberries in the 1990s, demand accelerated. Blueberries are packed with antioxidants, potassium and vitamin C, earning the coveted moniker of “superfood,” or what growers refer to as the “health halo.”

With its ideal climate and soils, the Northwest is a prime location for growing blueberries, Ostlund said.

“We can pretty much out- yield anybody anywhere in the world,” he said.

That momentum does not appear to be slowing anytime soon.

Kasey Cronquist, president of the U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council—a member-funded group that supports blueberry promotions and research — said household penetration is still only about 38%, compared to 70% or higher for strawberries.

“There is a lot of runway left for our industry to grab at household penetration rate,” Cronquist said, referring to the percentage of U.S. households that buy blueberries.

Silent treatment exasperates him

Dear Annie: I love my wife very much and try to be a good husband. However, my wife has an explosive temper. Whenever she is mad at me, she punishes me by not speaking to me. This time, she has not spoken to me for almost a week. On the other hand, she can talk to her friends on the phone for hours. What should I do? I am exasperated. — *Out of Ideas*

DEAR ANNIE



ANNIE LANE
Creators
Syndicate Inc.

Dear Out of Ideas: The silent treatment is bad medicine. It leaves wounds to fester when they could heal. Implore your wife to seek marriage counseling with you as soon as you’re able. It is imperative for the health of your marriage.

Dear Annie: Your answer to “Confused” was good as far as it went but I think you are missing another very important issue here. This guy’s behavior on the job is legally wrong. He is lucky he hasn’t gotten into serious trouble before now. Especially, for being a 50-year-old man hitting on a 20-something woman. If he keeps that up, I would be very surprised if someone didn’t lodge a complaint to human resources

against him. If someone hasn’t explained to him by now that his behavior borders on sexual harassment, then they should have. If no one else clues him in, then his wife definitely should. It is downright creepy that a guy in his 50s is hitting on someone young enough to be his daughter. I wish there had been a movement against that kind of behavior when I was that age. — *Suzie*

Dear Suzie: True: I only considered it from the wife’s perspective. You’ve raised another troubling aspect of the situation. These young women may well be as uncomfortable about the texts as is his wife. And though it’s not anyone else’s responsibility to teach him basic decency, perhaps your letter will inform him — and others — of the effect of his behavior. Let’s hope he shows more respect to everyone involved.

Dear Annie: When I was 12, my father taught me how to mow the lawn. We would first clear the yard, sidewalks and curb of any trash or other debris. He showed me how to start the mower and how to walk behind it and safely use it. Afterward, we raked the lawn (no grass

catcher on the mower). Then we would sweep the curb, street and sidewalk and bag up all the clippings. After this, we would then water the lawn and rinse off the curb. He explained that a clean curb would help water flow to the sewer drain. When fall would come, it was time for leaf removal. We would rake leaves and bag them up to set out for the trash collectors.

Forty years later, I still use the same regimen. I am appalled by commercial and residential lawn caretakers who blow all the clippings in the street or at the curb. It is so disturbing to me to see curbs that have grass, weeds, paper and debris of all kinds. When it rains, it floods because the water can’t flow down to the sewers. The debris clogs the curbs. This letter is to appeal to everyone who mows lawns and blows leaves to please do not blow them in the street or curbs. Bag it up and set it out for recycling. — *Father Knew Best*

Dear FKB: Leaving yard waste in the street is impolite and, in many cities, illegal. In addition to clogging storm drains, it can become slick and endanger cyclists and pedestrians. Avoid incurring fines and your neighbors’ wrath: Sweep and bag up your clippings.

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