

Every shade of blue for B.C. berries

by Hugh Maynard

Many successful non-synthetic chemical (nosynth) farmers must add one more chore to the list after they've taken care of everything else: marketing. Self-directed marketing of farm produce is sometimes the only way to make sufficient margins to cover the additional costs inherent with nosynth management methods.

At Matsqui Blue Farms, marketing is not so much a chore but rather an integral part of all the different segments comprising the farm's production of nosynth blueberries. Located in the heart of British Columbia's Fraser Valley, an hour east of Vancouver, the Matsqui blueberry farm uses every trick in the book - innovation, variety, retail sales - to carve itself a niche in a region abundant with small fruit and market garden vegetable production.

Jennifer Cichanovich came back in 1985 from a life in the city to take over the farm after her father's death, inheriting 7.5 acres of high-bush blueberries, some planted when the farm was started in 1948. She has since added other varieties, offering a total of 19 different ones to please the taste of any and all prospective consumers.

"Blueberry bushes don't reach peak production until they're 100 years old," explains Cichanovich, which bodes well for future harvest prospects. The farm currently produces between 100,000 and 115,000 pounds of blueberries annually, 10% of which are sold at the Grenville Market in Vancouver, 10% as U-pick at the farm and the balance (fresh and frozen) to distributors. The farm will hire up to 100 pickers in a single day to ensure highest quality.

Public relations pay

Dealing with people is evidently a significant factor in the management of Matsqui Blue Farms, although dealing with U-pickers who cannot hide the fact that they have checked out the merchandise hardly fits the text-book description of 'management'.

"Everybody eats, all the kids have blue lips," says Cichanovich. "But we provide chairs, umbrellas for shade, and I take my time with them to find out what they like, whether sweet or tart."

Friendly and informative service is also a priority for her companion, Chris Croner, who, in-season, hauls the fresh blueberries to the

lucrative Grenville Market four days a week. In a well-practiced manner, he readily rhymes off all the attributes of blueberries - high in vitamins, good prevention against diarrhoea and excellent for diabetics - and doesn't hesitate to take a swipe at would be imitators.

"We put pictures of the different berries on cardboard to show the consumers the different types and promote them as organically produced. Others try to compete with us by putting up signs that say 'No spray', when all that means is that there's no spray on the berries. But they still use chemicals on the ground and on the buds," Croner warns.

Cichanovich and Croner turned to both nosynth production and self-marketing when they became disillusioned with the conventional approach to farm produce as exemplified by their local co-op, which gave low priority for farmers who didn't purchase the mostly chemical inputs offered for sale by the organization. Matsqui Blue Farms is now certified by the British Columbia Association for Regenerative Agriculture (BCARA).

Not sustainable

The pair believe many of the conventional practices carried out on surrounding blueberry and other small fruit farms won't be able to pay in the long run. Croner points to the low-lying land in that part of the Fraser Valley, which occasionally floods, and cannot bear any heavy equipment without causing serious compaction problems. The only tractor on their farm is a modified 14 hp lawn tractor and tile drainage has only been installed to prevent root rot, not to facilitate the short-term gain of using a larger tractor.

Compost is the main source of nutrients for the blueberry bushes, which are pruned annually. The clippings are mixed with peat moss and chicken manure from the farm's free-range hens and "cooked" under a tarp for a year. This mixture is also supplemented with a foliar fertilizer, which Croner calls "marinure", made of rain water, liquid seaweed and fish liver emulsion. The odour from the mix also helps to keep insect pests at bay.

The chickens have a dual purpose, being in addition an essential component of disease and weed management. Hand weeding is followed by cutting, using a scythe, during the growing season. Later, the chickens are turned out into paddocks where they scratch and peck the earth surface clean. This operation also reduces the incidence of "Mummy-berry" infection, a fungus that attacks young buds. The 'scratched' areas are then mulched with the compost, which in turn helps to reduce disease and provide winter groundcover for the soil.

Future plans will be centred around diversification into other small fruits, according to Cichanovich, with any changes or additions following in the nosynth path established for the blueberries. The farm already offers a potato patch for U-pickers - she says people just like to dig around in the soil - and some adjoining fields produce nosynth hay for sale to other farms.

More to ecology than just the soil . . .

Farmers are constantly confronted with a variety of problems that have environmental consequences. Conventional solutions are often determined by convenience; the ecological choice is usually a question of attitude.

For example, the marketing of blueberries at Matsqui Blue Farms has expanded into a line of frozen berries for distributors, confronting Jennifer Cichanovich with a packaging dilemma that has environmental consequences. The convenient solution would be to buy one-way boxes; her ecological attitude said, "No, there must be a better way." And there is; Cichanovich re-uses old boxes from the liquor store for packaging the blueberries.

That same attitude has also resulted in more ecologically favourable solutions for two of the farms biggest pests: moles and starlings.

Poisoned bait would be the convenient solution for keeping the mole population in check. But despite the extra care and attention that "Blue", the canine mole catcher, requires to perform his duties, his presence is a lot more compatible with the farm's philosophy of not using synthetic chemicals. And a lot nicer to have another best friend around too!

Starlings can be a plague for small fruit farmers in the Fraser Valley. Convenient solutions are propane guns that go off incessantly to scare the birds away, or netting stretched out across the bushes of maturing fruit. Many of the birds become entangled in the netting, with the air becoming permeated with the stench of rotting carcasses in bad years of infestation.

Cichanovich uses a starling cage instead. The birds are attracted by some grain into the wire-mesh cage through a thin opening; once in, they cannot find their way out. Although some of the birds do die, especially when the cage becomes jammed as a few trapped birds draw the curiosity of passing flocks, most are bagged and sold to ethnic consumers for meals at religious and special occasions.

The results in the end are the same; a little thought for ecological considerations, however, makes a big difference in the consequences of human activity associated with agriculture.

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