

Oregon leads the nation in production of various caneberries, soon to be in season

Oregon berries look to a fruitful present and future

June 14, 2006... They are often referred to as caneberries because the fruit grows on a stalk or long cane. Most people know them by their individual names of blackberries, raspberries, and their respective varieties such as Marionberries, loganberries, and boysenberries. Oregon is a major producer of these berries, which, over the next several weeks, will ripen. Some 900 growers and 20 processors of these tasty and healthy small fruits are hoping that demand will continue to ripen in 2006 as well.

"There are always challenges to our caneberry growers from the global marketplace and the issues that plague other agricultural industries, such as labor," says Laura Barton, trade specialist with the Oregon Department of Agriculture. "But there is a lot of buzz around the nutritional value of our berries as well as the incredible flavor. Hopefully, that will help sustain and even expand the industry."

Oregon's Willamette Valley is one of the most productive areas of the world when it comes to growing caneberries. Oregon leads the nation in commercial production of blackberries, loganberries, and black raspberries. In fact, 65 percent of U.S. blackberries in 2005 were planted in Oregon on 7,755 acres. California is a distant second with only 700 acres of blackberry production last year. Oregon is second in the nation in commercial production of red raspberries and boysenberries. The total value of caneberries in Oregon last year exceeded \$53 million. Combined with value-added processing, Oregon's caneberry industry remains a major economic factor in several Willamette Valley counties.

"Most of our caneberries go into processing," says Barton. "You can find them as a frozen item—individually quick frozen berries are in stores year around. You can also find a number of products made from these berries such as jams, juices, purees, and syrups."

These days, caneberries are offered as a fresh market item more often than in the past.

"A lot of people go find fresh berries at farmers markets, but you can find them in local retail stores more often, too," says Barton. "One reason is some of the packaging technologies— including the clamshell plastic containers— that help preserve those fragile berries a little better nowadays."

Just a decade ago, blackberries were not found on grocery store shelves in the eastern U.S. and only rarely on the shelf in the west. Nothing has boosted the sales of Oregon caneberries more than research on their health benefits. As consumers have become more health conscious, they have turned to berries, among other fruits high in vitamin C, fiber, and anti-oxidants.

"In recent years, the health attributes of eating berries has become widely understood," says George Crispin, a member of the Oregon Raspberry and Blackberry Commission. Crispin also works for RainSweet, a cooperative processor owned by 37 caneberry growers in the Willamette Valley. "Breakfast

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cereals have added dried berries because of their health and nutrition value, despite the cost it adds. Consumers will pay a premium for something that tastes great and is good for you."

Oregon caneberries can be found in bakery fillings, jams, health bars, snack foods, smoothies, barbecue sauces, desserts, beer, and even cosmetics. A new product in the market is a freeze-dried berry powder that can be used as a topping for cheesecake, yogurt, and ice cream– or can be eaten by itself.

As ingredients, Oregon raspberries, blackberries, Marionberries, and others find their way into foodservice companies as well as bakery distributors– one area of the industry that continues to expand.

Caneberry production has stayed relatively constant the past three years. In 2005, Oregon produced about 58.5 million pounds of caneberries– down from 59 million in 2004 but up from 53 million in 2003. Blackberries dominate the overall production. However, raspberry production has increased the past three years.

"Overall, the production trend has been somewhat constrained by less than favorable weather conditions that have affected the size of the berry crops in Oregon," says Crispin. "But because of positive marketing programs developed by the commission and individual marketing efforts by RainSweet and others, the demand for berries grown and processed in Oregon is strong. That demand supports continued industry growth."

This season once again looks like a bit of a short crop. A hard freeze in February affected yields in some growing areas. Still, Oregon has an overall advantage over other production areas.

"We have the soil and the mild climate perfect for growing Marions and other berries," says Pieper Sweeney of Country Heritage Farms, a family-owned operation near Dayton that produces about 100 acres of Marionberries as well as other crops. Marionberries have only been commercially available since the 1970s.

One trend to keep an eye on is the growth in imported berries. U.S. consumers are starting to see more berries from Chile, China, and Europe. The Chilean fruit offers a counter-seasonal supply of berries to the marketplace. But local growers are always concerned that fruit from outside the border can be grown so much cheaper– even with higher transportation costs built in.

Like any other agricultural commodity in Oregon, the future of caneberries depends on the bottom line.

"The industry could grow like mad in the next ten years if we can grow the fruit at a profit," says Dave Dunn, chair of the Raspberry and Blackberry Commission and general manager of Willamette Valley Fruit Company in Salem. His company has expanded its operations each year since it started in 1999.

Dunn believes Oregon's advantages include the quality of fruit, the know-how in growing it, and growers' support of research and promotion. Challenges for the present and the future include labor shortages, the minimum wage index, and lower prices offered by producers in other countries.

But for this year, Oregon will once again look to match its reputation as a premium producer and processor of caneberries.

For more information, contact Laura Barton at (503) 872-6600.