

PYO Blueberries A Growers Perspective
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Maurice Tougas
Tougas Family Farm
Northborough, MA 01532

The purpose of this presentation is to discuss my perspective on the pros and cons for growers considering planting or expanding commercial PYO Blueberry plantings. I will look at some of our experiences with cultural practices including pest challenges, marketing and a stab at a prediction for future trends.

Background:

We made our first planting of 4 acres in 1982. The planting was made on old orchard land, consisting of Paxton Fine Sandy Loam soil. Varieties included Earliblue, Blueray, Bluetta, Bluecrop, Jersey, Coville and Lateblue. Spacing was at 5'X 9', more or less. We were very stretched labor wise, and so the more or less part of the 9' varies from closer to 8' to 12'. Our inexperience at planting this many bushes resulted in varieties not being planted in as organized a fashion as I would today. Great for pollination, not so great at harvest time. Live and learn. Soil prep was minimal, about right for the dollars available at the time, and the desire to get plants into the ground ASAP.

Irrigation was not in place, nor was adequate weed control. This resulted in rather slow growth the first couple of years, and a delay in first harvest.

Since then we have added a total of 2 more acres of Berkley, Duke, Liberty and Draper, 5'X10' spacing.

Our first significant harvest was in 1987.

We will be planting another acre or so in the next year or so. We have limited our expansion due to our desire to market the entire crop via PYO. We have managed to balance production with demand for these past twenty or so years, and only this past season did we not manage to market the entire crop. That said, it was our largest crop ever, and the harvest season was spread out over an unusually long period of time. We began harvest the first of July, and finally gave up the first of October when demand fell off to being negligible.

We are open five days a week for PYO Blueberries. We feel that for the most part a week should pass between picking fields to allow the fruit to sweeten. This can vary of course depending upon temperatures.

I will be discussing more details regarding how we market soon. It also gives us a breather from having the public on farm seven days a week.

Cultural considerations:

We like to plant bushes at least a foot tall. We will have irrigation in place when we make plantings. Proper soil prep is a must, and we include addition of organic matter and sulfur to the planting rows.

We mulch our planting with aged wood chips for weed control, moisture retention and to keep the soil temp constant. I'll have more to say about mulching later.

We will use post emergent herbicides the first couple of seasons, and perhaps a mild pre emergent.

We attempt to deflower plants the first couple of years to encourage the bushes to fill their space. We use compost, Ammonium Sulfate, SulPoMag and sometimes triple 15 for fertilizer.

Pests:

#1 BIRDS! - We are surrounded by wood lots, and dare not be late in applying netting every season. We have used the black extruded 3/4" netting in the past, but we have been using "Smart Net" these past couple of seasons and are happy with that. The difference is that it is a knitted material rather than extruded, and so is much easier to handle. I cannot tell you if it will have a longer life than the extruded. It is about double the cost to purchase. It can be purchased as wide as 50' and so we are able to cover five rows at a time. With the 14' wide extruded we could only cover 1 row at a time, and needed to seam each row rather than every fifth row, so the savings is in labor in the long run. The Smart Net system also utilizes a wire within each edge, so spreading and retrieving are easier. We've tried balloons, audio distress and predator calls, flash tape and repellants. None of these have worked to our satisfaction.

#2 Weeds - I'm shy with the use of herbicides around my bushes. For better or for worse. The plants are shallow rooted and appear to me to be sensitive to herbicide use, and so I probably tend to err on the side of caution.

We have a good supply of wood chips, and so have depended on the use of these to supplement herbicides. The continued use of the chips tends towards a different weed complex over time, favoring perennials which are of course often more difficult to control. Also the very high organic content tends to limit the effectiveness of some herbicides, while of course it safens the use of others. We have also been recently been using a hybrid Reggi hydraulic cultivator/ Phil Brown herbicide boom to do in row cultivating. This leads us to our third most important or difficult pest

#3 Voles - Being a perennial crop which tends to get ignored in apple season, voles can be a real headache. Add to that the fact that they love compost, which wood chips ultimately become, and you have ideal conditions for mice/voles.

Close mowing and good in row weed control help, but the critters love the home you provide with mulch. Remember you are keeping the birds out for a couple of months, and that includes owls, hawks and probably foxes and coyotes, and so the mice will soon fall in love with you blueberry planting.

The difficulty we've had controlling these critters has lead us to alternate mulching with cultivation as described with the rotary type cultivator earlier to break up vole habitat to discourage population buildup. Upping herbicide use to keep a clean a row as possible also helps a great deal.

#4 Diseases - Mummyberry has not been a major concern probably due to some of our cultural practices such as cultivation and/or the use of wood chip mulches. We do also apply fungicides as appropriate.

Cane blights such as Phomopsis have been problems for us. We utilize pruning and fungicides as needed.

Anthracnose has been a problem for us as well, but have been controlled with the use of fungicides.

#5 Insects - Maggot has not been a problem for us.

Japanese Beetles are a problem some years.. Adult populations can be very difficult to control as they appear during harvest, and with PYO, applications of insecticides when there are pickers soon to be in the field can be problematic to say the least. This goes for fungicides as well. Since

these beetles will travel a distance to enjoy your berries, much of your control effort will need to take place outside of the planting as well. keep an eye on parking lots and other grassed areas nearby.

Marketing PYO.

Be patient, fair and firm. If you can't be, either hire someone who can, or don't do PYO.

A couple of points I mentioned earlier I will repeat. In central MA harvest will begin around the first of July, and continue well into September.

Fields/bushes need a week or so to ripen and develop flavor between pickings. This is especially important because as many times as you tell your customers that they are called "BLUE" berries, they will still pick green and or purple berries. One my best pickers is a blind woman, and you cannot fool her. She picks blue fruit, and knows it if she is on a bush not ripe enough from her sense of touch. And so we have learned to explain to pickers that the fruit will come off the bush easily when ripe. They will still pick immature fruit, and so it is better to let the fruit get riper before you let them have at it. Without netting, you'll probably be tempted to let them in when the birds start so you have a fighting chance.

I don't want to be having my crew picking blueberries if it can be helped. We market essentially all of our crop PYO.

Who picks blueberries?

1) Family outing.

Maybe better stated, mom with her kids and a bunch of their friends. Blueberry picking tends to be less of a "Family" thing than say apple picking, and so fewer dads are along. Since blueberry season is largely in the summer and the kids are out of school, picking is more spread out over weekdays and less concentrated on weekends. In fact, you might just find that many of those "less interested in buying fruit, more interested in eating fruit" tend towards the weekend in blueberry season. Because of these two factors, the tourist pickers and the neighborhood gang, we have instituted a prepay system into our marketing. Everyone pays \$3.00 before entering the field. Your \$3 is applied towards your purchase when you are finished picking and you weigh out. If you are not interested in purchasing \$3 worth of fruit, I'm not interested in having you in the blueberry planting. I started by saying you need to be patient, fair and firm. The \$3 helps with the patience, as at least they will not walk away without having spent 3 bucks to be entertained, and fed. It is fair since it is not my job to provide customers with free entertainment nor a free lunch, and it does require being firm if you have not required prepay in the past. In the long run it is a whole lot easier on staff than dealing with the likes of the freeloaders who have no intention of doing anything but graze their way thru your farm. Some farms have started charging a non refunded entry fee. It is something we've considered for years, and probably a good way to go in the future.

2) Serious pickers

These are the blueberry lovers. These are the people who remember the good old days when they picked berries along side the road on the way to the beach. Some of these people just plain like to pick blueberries. We want to reward these pickers and encourage them to return. They cost us less to handle and they are usually very pleasant. I'm not telling you where to find them.

We reward them by giving them a discount when they purchase larger quantities, for example, they get a 50 cent /lb. break for 10 lb..... and a dollar or so break for 20 lb. or more.

These pickers tend to be less influenced by the weather, and can't wait to be able to pick again.

They tend to be older, and so the future will bring fewer of them.

Handling harvest.

We have divided our fields into pretty distinctive units. We rope off areas not to be picked that day, and direct customers to open fields. Within those fields we attempt to direct pickers to areas where we know the picking is the best. Not doing so will result in everyone insisting that we saved the 6 acres for them to be the first to pick, and so there is no need to proceed past the first bush. Everyone wants to pick on that poor first bush. Of course there are those who think we make money by assigning them the worst bushes to pick from, and that we're saving the best for grandmother. They will not listen. Let them pick where the good pickers already picked. We provide customers with containers to fill and a quart plastic container with string attached to hang from their neck. Signage explains how to pick and we also position field supervisors to help out.

Future Trends?

If I had a dollar for every time I was wrong.....

Our sales have been growing every year the crop allows it to. That is a good thing. However, 2009 was the first season we did not sell our entire crop. Partially due to the weather, partly due to the large size of the crop and partly due to increased competition. We have been seeing an increase in plantings in our area over the past 5 years or so, as has the nation as a whole. I'm told that in Michigan growers are not making new plantings and that wholesale prices dropped to below cost of harvest last season. Sort of sounds familiar.

Blueberries have been a "hot" item these past several years with all the talk of anti oxidant health benefits, and so this has helped sales keep pace with increased plantings. Unfortunately we begin harvest at about the time the glut in NJ begins, and when the supermarkets use them as their loss leader for the fourth.

Certainly the "buy local" and "staycation" phenomenon are helping.

As with pumpkin and apple picking I am optimistic that blueberry picking will evolve into the thing to do every summer and so demand will grow as strongly as supply is bound to.