

Haskap Berries: A New Fruit Worth Considering

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Introduction

Haskap berries (*Lonicera caerulea*), also known as 'Honeyberry' or 'Blue Honeysuckle' are a type of edible berry located within the honeysuckle genus. The fruit has a similar dark blue color like blueberries, but has a distinct oval-looking shape to them (see photo). They have a taste most commonly associated as a mix between raspberry and blueberry. Haskaps shrubs are very hardy and can be grown in USDA Hardiness zones 1 to 8, though they tend to do better in zones 2 through 5. What makes the fruit unique is that it ripens early in the season, about the same time strawberries do in the middle of June to early July. When fully grown, haskaps can produce between 6 to 10 lbs. of fruit, and usually grow to 4–7 feet in height. It is estimated that Haskap shrubs can survive at least 30 years, and possibly even longer if property managed.



Haskap berries or blue honeysuckles showing the diversity of shapes and sizes. Photo Credit: Bob Bors

Historical Background

In the wild, Haskaps are found in northern Boreal regions of the globe, most especially in places like Russia, Siberia, the northern Island of Japan, and parts of the US and Canada. The main groups that started cultivating this shrub were the Russians and the Japanese. The Russians used it to make alcohol and were not as concerned about sugar levels. However, the Japanese bred for fresh eating and to make into value-added products like jams and juices. It is from Japan that we get the name 'Haskap,' which means, "berry of long life." In fact, there is a long-standing tradition of haskap cultivation in Japan that stretches back at least a few centuries.

In the late 90's and early 2000's two horticultural researchers in the United States and Canada took notice of Haskaps. Both researchers took separate trips over to parts of Russia and Japan, looking for the best genetic stock available to start their own individual breeding programs. In the US, it was Dr. Maxine Thompson from Oregon State, and in Canada, it was Dr. Bob Bors from the University of Saskatchewan. Thompson focused more of her efforts on the Japan varieties because most of Oregon was located in a milder climate like zones 6 through 8. It happened to be that the northern island of Japan where haskap production was most prevalent was located in zone 5. Thompson was breeding for warmer climates so she relied more heavily on the Japanese types rather than the Russian varieties. She eventually released a few improved varieties that can be purchased today. However, Bob Bors was part of the fruit program at the University of Saskatchewan which sits in zones 2 through 4. Bors was looking for fruits that could be grown in northern areas of Canada. As a result, he relied on a mixture of genetics from Japan, and Russia. Bors eventually released his own improved varieties and many of them have a slightly more Russian background. As a result of both breeding programs, improved haskaps varieties are now on the market and they tend to have larger berry size, better quality taste, and higher yields.

Currently, Canadian producers are about 10 years ahead of the US in terms of Haskap production. This is due, in part, because of the work of Bob Bors who continues to do haskap research for the University of Saskatchewan. Thompson retired in the early 2000's and continued her breeding program post-retirement well into her early 90's.

Benefits of Growing Haskaps

1. Site Selection: Haskaps can be grown in a variety of locations in upstate NY, especially in zones 3 through 5. They

are very resilient shrubs that can tolerate different soils, but do best in well-drained, loam or sandy loam soils. They can tolerate clay soil if the location is well-drained. They can also handle a wide range of pH levels. Unlike blueberries, which need high acidic soils, Haskaps can handle pH levels between 5 to 7. This is beneficial for Oswego County growers who have a range of soil types and pH levels.

2. New Market: Haskap production is still a new emerging market, both in terms of direct-to-consumer sales and wholesale distribution channels. This fruit could provide growers an economic advantage because it would be one of the first fruits of the season, alongside strawberries. Having early ripening dates in the middle of June through early July also helps with berry pests like the Spotted Wing Drosophila (SWD), which is a fruit fly that lays larvae eggs in small fruits like blueberries and raspberries in middle to late summer. In this case, Haskaps ripen before SWD become a major problem.

3. Scalable: Haskap shrubs can start being harvested within three years of planting and the plant is considered fully mature after five years. This provides economic advantages in that growers do not have to wait 5 to 8 years like many other fruits. Haskap can also be planted 3 to 4 feet apart and will create a hedgerow that can be harvested either by hand or mechanically. Some growers in Canada are planting 1,000 shrubs per acre and using mechanical devices similar to raspberry and blueberry harvesters.



Haskap berries grown in cold zones of the globe are extremely rich in anthocyanins and other Flavonoids and phytonutrients. Photo Credit: Wiki Commons

Challenges

All crops have their challenges and Haskap is no different. The main pest is the Cedar Waxwing bird, which loves to eat the berries as the first fruit of the season. Most Haskap producers have problems with Cedar Waxwings after a few seasons. As example, one grower located in the North County, Duane Smith, owner of Seaway Goldhardy Grapes, stated that he never had any Cedar Waxwings on his property until he started growing haskaps. Now he estimates he has about 25 of them on average. One option for addressing this problem is to plant haskaps along the edges of the field. Cedar Waxwings do not like to fly out in open fields and given the choice, will harvest the shrubs closest to the edges of the field. This has been met with some success in Canada, but more research is needed to determine if this is a good pest management solution. As a result, most berry producers invest in bird netting and usually install them sometime after the fruit becomes visible. Cedar Waxwings will eat the fruit even when it is green. As a result, the bird netting is normally left on through harvest.

Conclusion

CCE Oswego will be looking to do a series of Haskap workshops in the future. If you are interested in learning more about this new emerging fruit, please contact our local extension office. Haskap berries represent another fruit with a lot of potential for the small farms community, especially landowners located in the Tug Hill Plateau region (zone 4) or northern Oswego County (zone 5). The fruit would also fit very comfortably within Oswego County's Upick culture, but also could quickly scale up to a wholesale level depending upon the size of the operation. For more information, please check out the following resources:

University of Saskatchewan Fruit Program | Haskap
research-groups.usask.ca/fruit/Fruit%20crops/haskap.php

Cornell University CALS | Nursery Guide for Haskap/Honeyberry
blogs.cornell.edu/berrynurseries/other/haskaphoneyberry/