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## Huckleberries may be next hot berry

*Research centers on taming wild berries so they're easier to cultivate*

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University of Idaho horticulture professor and Sandpoint Research Extension Center superintendent Dan Barney looks over the huckleberry plants in development March 2.

New and improved huckleberry varieties will go to cooperating growers, researchers and nurseries next spring.

"We have the plants out in our nursery. They need another season of growth before I'm comfortable shipping them out," said Dan Barney, University of Idaho professor of horticulture and superintendent of the university's Sandpoint Research Extension Center.

The huckleberries will be tested to determine if they are good enough to name and release to the public. More varieties would then be available in 2012 and 2013.

"We are in position to make tremendous advances rapidly in the quality of the material because we're so early in the breeding program from the wild," Barney said. "We can make quantum leaps in quality."

As the breeding program progresses, improvements become more incremental, he said.

"Some of the early varieties are going to be good, but they're not going to be as good as the ones that come on later," he said.

Barney said huckleberries are an up-and-coming crop with tremendous economic potential, both for fruit production and nursery production of the plants to sell to fruit growers.

Cultivating huckleberries will also protect wild stands from excessive harvesting, he said.

"It is an important natural resource we would like to protect from over harvesting and poor management practices," he said.

Such measures would protect the plants and berries for recreational pickers and small processors, marketers and native Americans who use the plants as part of their culture.

Huckleberry research began in 1994, Barney said.

The huckleberries of most interest to the center fall within the taxonomic section Myrtilus, which includes the Idaho state fruit, the mountain huckleberry; the European blueberry or bilberry; the oval-leaf bilberry and the Cascade huckleberry.

The mountain huckleberry is most widely harvested throughout the Northwest and in Canada, Barney said.

Malcolm Dell is founder and executive coordinator of the fledgling International Wild Huckleberry Association, which has about 50 members.

"The wild huckleberry resource is in trouble," Dell said, citing changes in fire frequency, logging practices and climate. Commercial producers are also competing for berry sources.

Barney's research will take the pressure off the wild resource, as international and national markets increase for huckleberry products, Dell said.

"We have more companies starting up using huckleberries at the same time we have a declining resource," he said. "It's kind of a scary situation. Last year was the best crop in 15 years in huckleberries, but it was the exception, not the rule."

Using Barney's research, there is the opportunity to provide field-grown huckleberries, which would be a slightly different market but allow businesses a quality, cultivated product at a lower cost than wild berries.

"It's getting harder and harder to find people to harvest the wild resource in this country," he said.

It's not certain how large the huckleberry industry actually is, Barney said, because a majority of it takes place "underground," and there is no central organization.

Huckleberries are sold regionally in many different products, and are exported, particularly to Pacific Rim countries, and are popular in upscale restaurants. At a recent luncheon, President Barack Obama served huckleberries in the featured dessert.

In addition to the association, Dell and his wife, Sandy, operate Gourmet Innovations LLC, which includes a variety of huckleberry products, from syrups and jams to salsa and mustard.

The association formed after a similar organization languished, Dell said. The Dells decided to create a supporting website and bring people together to discuss the wild berries.

"We're mostly in the building phase right now, trying to get people together and talking about what this organism is going to be when it grows up," Dell said.

They are also getting involved in legislative issues.

Because huckleberries grow singly on a stem, as opposed to blueberries, which can be harvested quickly, they are picked individually by hand or using a rake. Different methods of harvest are being examined, Barney said. Rakes date back to native Americans, but Washington state bans the use of rakes.

Barney said the law is "not based on research, just more of a philosophy-type of thing."

Dell said huckleberry rakes make for good tools that don't damage plants.

Researchers are also working in cooperation with native populations to rediscover past methods of growing and harvesting the berries, Barney said.

The research primarily impacts nursery growers and fruit growers who either manage wild stands or cultivate huckleberries, Barney said.

The Sandpoint center has been primarily funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Northwest Center for Small Fruit Research and a grant to examine the health properties of huckleberries and bilberries.

"They are indeed very rich in anthocyanins and antioxidants," Barney said.

A grant typically runs from \$10,000 per year to \$28,000 per year, with the exception of a \$100,000 grant several years ago from the federal government to look at the biochemistry.

"We're hoping to increase that," Barney said.

Barney's program is in danger of losing funds as a result of the current Idaho budget squeeze, but the association is trying to rally support, Dell said.

One of Barney's pet peeves is people coming into the area, picking the fruit and shipping it overseas.

"There's no return to our area in terms of the economy," Barney said. "So there's no additional resources to help maintain this. I would like to see that change, so the production, processing and marketing take place here. The whole world still can benefit from this, but let's keep this an important resource for our area. This can be the huckleberry center of the world."

Dell wants to see huckleberries get the acknowledgment and value he feels they deserve in the marketplace, similar to blueberries. He'd like to see healthy growth in the industry without worrying about supply.

"Blueberries are a wonderful berry, but if you really like a berry, huckleberry has many advantages," he said. "Because huckleberries have a more intense flavor, of course they have some detractors. But most people who like blueberries love huckleberries."

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