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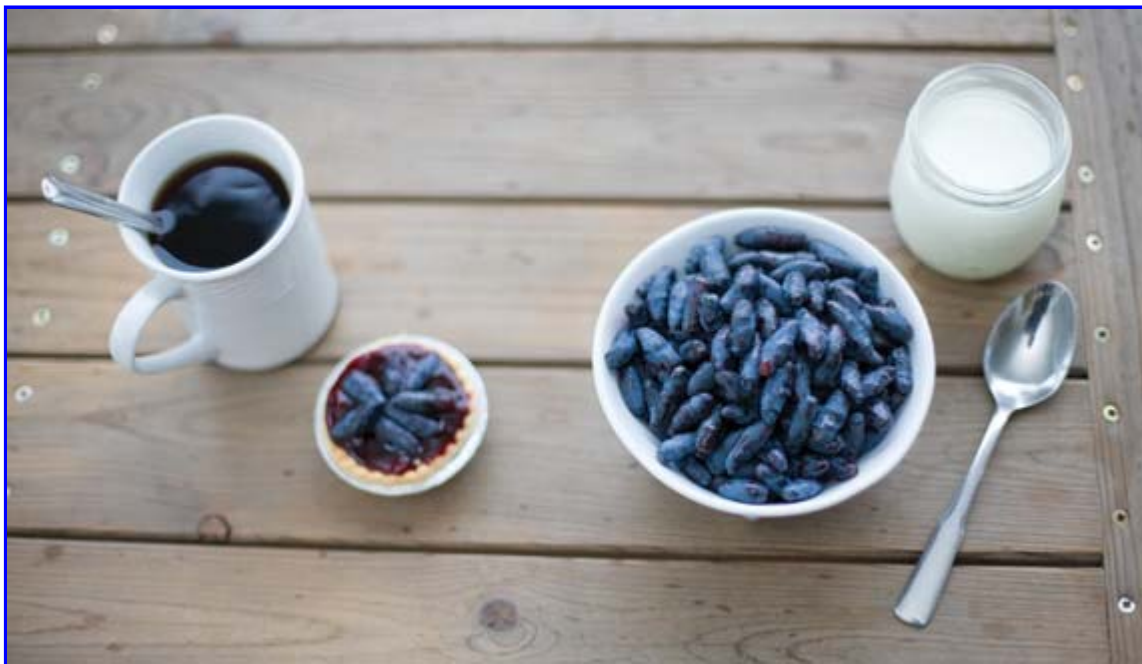
This Could be a Berry Sweet Deal | Little-known haskap has the potential to revive Alberta's fruit industry

Hardy perennial is already a hit in Saskatchewan

Sep 1, 2010 📅

by **Kenn Bur**

Photography by Ewan Nicholson



A fascinating new berry industry ideally suited for Western Canada is flourishing in Saskatchewan, but it's still virtually unheard of here in Alberta. The elongated, bluish berry stirring the interest of Prairie farmers is *Lonicera caerulea*, a circumpolar species native to most northern boreal forests. The sweet-tasting subspecies of this berry is called blue honeysuckle in Russia and haskap in Japan, named for the indigenous Ainu people of Hokkaido where the berries have been enjoyed for centuries.

Haskap berries are native to nine Canadian provinces – botanists are still searching for them in British Columbia – but they are relatively rare and often mistaken for wild blueberries. Their first notable appearance in Alberta was less than stellar. Commercial interest in the plant in North America was extinguished in the 1950s when an Alberta research station experimented with an ornamental variety that tasted awful. Conversely, Russian horticulturists started to breed sweet-tasting Siberian varieties in the 1950s and now have an impressive breeding program.

Potential for the plant in Canada was rekindled in the late 1990s when the University of Saskatchewan, led by assistant professor Bob Bors, purchased some newer Russian cultivars. Intrigued with how the berries began ripening in June, the university methodically developed a breeding program by acquiring Russian and Japanese plants.



Pete Wasylyshyn

Yet as interest in haskaps has grown across the Prairies in recent years, Alberta's \$11-million fruit industry still has no large-scale operations to rival Saskatchewan's burgeoning industry.

Pete Wasylyshyn, co-owner of Prairie Perfect Orchards near Innisfail, blames the Alberta government for not supporting its fruit industry. For example, Wasylyshyn says only three of 40 industry professionals at an Alberta berry and vegetable conference in 2009 had even heard about haskap.

"Alberta Agriculture has to get on board," says Wasylyshyn, who has 260 haskap plants plus 650 producing cherry trees and 12 varieties of apple trees. "Alberta Agriculture is literally gone unless you grow canola or beef. Our learning process is our own with the U of S. There is no help available in Alberta. None. Zero. We did everything we had to do with the U of S."

Robert Spencer, Alberta's commercial horticulture specialist, says the province supports fruit growers "as much as we can," but concedes that Alberta hasn't funded fruit breeding for at least a decade. Saskatchewan fruit growers "definitely benefited from having a research institution in their province," says Spencer. "And they've got a bigger core group of individuals that are really pushing things forward."

The Saskatchewan-based Haskap Canada Association (HCA) has 70-plus members, mostly from Saskatchewan, with nine Alberta growers. But there's considerable interest across Canada and the United States, including many blueberry farmers who have experienced price collapses in recent years.

Based on U of S royalties, it is estimated that there were about 160,000 haskaps planted in Canada in 2009, with a further 200,000 plants expected to be planted in 2010. HCA president Paul Mitchell, estimates there will be about 300 to 400 acres of commercial haskaps in Canada by the end of the 2010 growing season – about 60 per cent in Saskatchewan.

An acre of haskaps (about 800 plants) should yield about 2,500 kilograms of berries in its first-year crop, and as much as 5,000 kilograms by maturity in year seven. Although price estimates are speculative, some growers are estimating revenue of about \$9,000 per acre from mature haskaps.

And grower interest isn't about to ebb any time soon. For example, the U of S's only licensed propagator in Alberta, PrairieTech Propagation in Bonnyville, expects to sell about 50,000 plants again this year to growers across Canada and the United States for \$4 to \$10 a plant. Dan McCurdy, PrairieTech's manager, says his company is now selling far more haskaps than saskatoons.

Mitchell estimates this year's Western Canadian haskap crop, the first real harvest of any significance, will be about 113,000 kilograms, doubling in volume by 2012. Near-term harvests won't satiate current demand as HCA knows of at least one Canadian company that wants 270,000 kilograms a year. "It's sort of a delicate balance to get the public awareness out there in line with the production," says Mitchell.

But lack of product hasn't dampened interest from prospective buyers, including four American processors and various ice cream makers. "This week alone I've had two phone calls from different restaurants in Alberta wanting berries," says Mitchell. While Prairie farmers gamble that the haskap's unique taste will be a big hit with consumers, their commitment to commercialization is based on the berries' remarkable hardiness. The commercial plants released by the U of S hybrids are winter hardy to at least -40 C. Just as important, the early-blooming flowers aren't affected by late spring snowstorms as the flowers are frost-tolerant to -7 C. These hardy weather factors makes haskap berries a prime candidate for large-scale production in Alberta.


Bors says haskaps are a breakthrough for Western Canada's fruit industry. "It's not every day that you have a

new fruit."



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Liam

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Liam

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