

2000 Blackberry Outlook

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Many native Kentuckians have fond memories of going into the woods in their younger days to pick blackberries. Some Kentucky berry customers still occasionally comment wistfully about those

thorns, tarter and seedier berries, and even the snakes one might encounter when picking wild blackberries.

Adventure aside, however, Kentucky's commercial blackberry production can't seem to meet state demand. "Everything we pick, we sell," commented Jamae Pyles of Bray Orchards and Roadside Market in Bedford. This sentiment is held by berry producers across the state. Whether sold as pick-your-own, in retail stores, or at farmers markets, demand is strong for blackberries in Kentucky.

Bramble Demand Strong

Nationally, demand is on the rise for fresh and processed blackberries and other bramble crops such as red raspberries. Oregon's Willamette Valley produces over 80% of the nation's bramble crops, and a 1993 Oregon State University publication noted rising sales and prices for caneberries like blackberries and red raspberries. These trends have continued nationally into 2000.

"Local fresh high quality berries will increase demand in most farm communities (in Ohio)," notes Dick Funt, a small fruit production expert at The Ohio State University. The demand outlook for Kentucky is very similar. Demand in farm communities will continue to increase, but producers nearer population centers should have an added marketing edge. Regardless of location, many of Kentucky's blackberry growers report plans to either expand production or replace older stands over the next two years.

Producers should not discount the impact of import berries upon their local markets. According to Funt, recent years have seen off-season imports into the Columbus, OH market have a positive impact on the local fresh market. The off-season supply has apparently helped increase local season demand by teasing the consumer's palate for the arrival of the fresher local berries.

High Quality Demanded

Even with the memories of wild blackberries in some minds, consumers usually prefer today's sweeter, larger berry with less seeds. Consumers demand a high quality berry, one that appears fresh and is attractively packaged.

Fresh market producers are often able to virtually name their price for high-quality, fresh berries. This is especially true when product is properly presented. Retail and farmers market blackberries are best marketed in clear plastic, one-pint containers of freshly picked product. This allows for optimal consumer consideration.

New cultivars released by the University of Arkansas and others over the past ten years have especially caught the eye of many producers and the palate of many consumers. Field and quality trials are expanding in Kentucky to identify the best producing and tasting of these varieties.

Untapped Markets

Kentucky producers have the benefit of having many untapped market channels for in-season bramble crops. Most blackberries are currently marketed via traditional market channels, but other channels exist for fresh market blackberries. Kentucky's produce auctions serve as one example of an existing channel that offers much promise for fresh market outlets. Furthermore, larger grocery retailers often consider featuring in-season, local berry crops.

"We haven't even begun to realize the full market

potential for fresh market brambles in Kentucky,” says UK Extension marketing specialist Dr. Tim Woods. Woods and others believe that Kentucky’s strength will be to continue to fill the fresh market niche, but he doesn’t totally discount the long-term potential for value-added processing of the crops. Indeed, the USDA’s Economic Research Service notes “strong increases in consumption” nationally for frozen blackberries and other brambles apart from the fresh market in the October 1999 Fruit and Nut Outlook.

People Love Blackberries

Brambles such as blackberries are not an easy crop to establish. There is a significant startup

cost, demanding management, and time lapse of more than two years after establishment before a full crop can be harvested. But economically and anecdotally, blackberries can be a successful addition or expansion for Kentucky growers.

“People love blackberries,” says producer Yvonne DePoister of Three Spring Farms at Big Clifty. It’s true that a handful of consumers might still yearn for the wild blackberries picked with Grandpa. But those memories aside, a continued demand for high quality commercial berries offers promise for producers willing to invest the time and capital into further developing Kentucky’s blackberry market.