52. Harvesting Wild Blueberries

HARVEST TIME
In fields, harvesting begins when 90% of the blueberries are ripe, usually at the beginning of August. In forest operations the harvest generally starts 7 days later. Harvesting continues over a period of 3 to 5 weeks, the workers often being in the fields and forests at the crack of dawn. Others work at night to take advantage of the cool. Harvesting is also done on rainy days.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED
In blueberry fields:
• mechanical or motorized harvester;
• car or truck;
• trailer;
• clothing suitable for different weather;
• plastic crates supplied by the buyer.
In forests:
• car or truck;
• trailer;
• ATV (for rough roads);
• camper, tent or other temporary shelter;
• camping equipment;
• clothing suitable for different weather;
• food supplies;
• berry rake;
• harvest containers (e.g. 5-gallon plastic pails);
• forest maps (for unfamiliar harvest areas);
• plastic crates supplied by the buyer.
To facilitate the traceability of forest-harvested blueberries, since 2009 buyers in two areas of Québec are required to do the following:
• for forest blueberries:
  • supply size 2 crates, which can hold 11.3 to 13.6 kg (25 to 30 lb);
  • clearly identify on a forest map where the blueberries were harvested.
• for field blueberries:
  • supply size 3 crates, which can hold 15.9 to 18.1 kg (35 to 40 lb).
These requirements only apply to the Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean and the La Tuque MRC (territories under supply management).
HARVESTING FIELD-GROWN BLUEBERRIES

Increasingly, field-grown blueberries are harvested using different types of mechanized or motorized harvesters. With such a machine (Figure 1), two workers can harvest up to 1500 kg of blueberries per day. High-performance machines (Figure 2) can harvest up to 4000 kg per day.

Large blueberry fields (e.g. on public lands)

Large fields are divided into parcels to facilitate the harvest, and the parcels assigned to pickers in whatever way works best for the producer:

- by drawing lots, since parcels can vary considerably in productivity and ease of picking;
- by the order in which pickers arrive at the field;
- based on the experience and seniority of the pickers.

Giving each parcel a number will make it easier to plan the harvest, verify the quality of the crop, and ensure that no part of the field is overlooked.

To encourage pickers to stay through to the end of the picking season, some producers alternate harvesting between more productive and less productive parcels, making sure to reserve some productive parcels for the last week of harvest.

Pickers bring their full crates to the weigh station to have them weighed and to receive their weight tickets. The crates are then stacked on pallets and identified before being loaded into trailers for trucking to the freezing plants.

To avoid congestion at the freezing plants, harvesting should be spread over at least 3 weeks. The plants generally set quotas for the number of crates that can be delivered per day.

Small blueberry fields

At smaller operations, harvesting is usually done by the owner and his family, though occasionally it is done on contract. At the end of the day the pickers go to the freezing plant or an authorized buying station, where weighing is done and the pickers are paid for the day’s harvest.
HARVESTING FOREST BLUEBERRIES

Each year in Québec, harvesting wild blueberries in the forest is an important economic activity for many families. Some pickers start preparing their season as early as June, scouting vast stretches of forest in search of recently logged or burned areas. Since the blueberry is in bloom at that time of year, promising sites are easily identified. Other pickers wait for the fruit to start forming before they prospect for a picking area. On the website of the Syndicat des producteurs de bleuets du Québec, all of the maps required for forest picking in the upper Lac-Saint-Jean region are available at: www.spbq.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=53&Itemid=97.

At the end of July normally, pickers set up camp near their harvest areas and the buying stations. When the buying stations open, the forest blueberry harvest begins. The pickers walk the terrain all day looking for blueberries. Picking is done using specially designed hand rakes or combs (Figure 3) with containers for the fruit. In the evening they take the day's harvest to a buying station, sell it and pick up a supply of empty crates.

The volume produced by the forest harvest varies from year to year depending on the weather and market prices. The higher the price, the more pickers will be out in the forests, the opposite being true when prices are low.

RECEIVING AT THE FREEZING PLANT

Each day, blueberries from fields or the forest are brought by truck to the freezing plants. Upon reception each lot of blueberries is weighed again, inspected, identified and coded, ensuring its traceability through every step of processing and shipping to customers. Then the blueberries are briefly stored until they can be cleaned and frozen, which is always done within 24 hours of their arrival at the plant. Almost 95% of the Québec harvest is processed in freezing plants before being shipped to Canadian and international markets, primarily Europe, Japan and the United States.
52. Harvesting Wild Blueberries

COMPLEMENTARY LEAFLET

53. Quality Control

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PROJECT COORDINATION
Sophie Gagnon, Agronomist, Project Management Coordinator, Agrinova, Alma

WRITING

COLLABORATION
André Gagnon, Agronomist, Horticulture and Organic Agriculture Consultant, Ministère de l’Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l’Alimentation du Québec, Alma
Marie-Eve Moreau, Agronomist, Consultant, Club Conseil Bleuet, Dolbeau-Mistassini
Véronique Moreau, Agronomist, Coordinator, Club Conseil Bleuet, Dolbeau-Mistassini

PUBLISHING
Chantale Ferland, M.Sc., Publishing Project Officer, CRAAQ, Québec
Lyne Lauzon, Publications Coordinator, CRAAQ, Québec

TRANSLATION
Rod Willmot, M.A.

LAYOUT AND GRAPHIC DESIGN
Sylvie Robitaille, Computer Graphics Technician, CRAAQ, Québec

PRODUCED BY

AGRINOVAA

FUNDAGED BY

MARIA-CHAPELAINB

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