

# From tiny huckleberries, mighty blueberries spring

## N.J. woman promoted 'Pineys' crop

By **BRENDAN SCHURR**  
Associated Press

WHITESBOG, N.J. — You can thank Elizabeth White for your blueberry pancakes.

And your blueberry pie, and scones and muffins and jam.

In the late 1800s, Elizabeth, the daughter of a farmer, figured there had to be a way to cultivate the tiny huckleberries that grew wild in the sandy soil of the Pinelands.

From their uncertain beginning on the White's farm in the middle of Burlington County, blueberries have grown into a multimillion dollar, worldwide crop.

Elizabeth was the oldest of four daughters of Joseph and Mary White. When she was 22, she began working on the family cranberry farm, handing out tickets to workers in exchange for the boxes of berries they harvested in the fall.

She took a liking to farm work and tried to think of a way to improve the business by extending the growing season.

Many farmers in the area had tried to devise a way to cultivate wild huckleberries, without success.

"We used to go around sampling these fruits and one would be too sour and one would be too flat," White said in a tape-recorded interview in 1953, the year before she died. "One would be too skinny and finally, we would come to one that father

would call 'peachy,' but we didn't know how to propagate the plant. At that time, it was said among the farmers of New Jersey that blueberries could not be cultivated."

In 1911, White read that Dr. Frederick V. Coville, a scientist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, was beginning research on cultivated blueberries. She convinced her father that Whites Bog had the necessary resources for the research and they asked the government to let them help with the experiments.

"They had the proper soil, they had huckleberries and they had money," Janet Robbins, a board member of the Whitesbog Preservation Trust, said in a recent visit to the farm. The trust is a nonprofit organization that is restoring and preserving the village where the Whites and their workers lived.

The government agreed to the Whites' proposal and five years later, the first crop of blueberries was ready for market. Once they were cultivated their name was changed from huckleberries to blueberries, Robbins said.

White, who counted herself among the "Pineys" in the area, knew that the local people would know where to find the bushes with the best and biggest berries.

She gave the Pineys jars of a preservative and metal gauges with different size holes in them and asked them to find bushes with berries at least 5/8 inch in diameter.



Elizabeth White (right) looks over a blueberry bush with worker Elmer Haines in 1933 in Burlington County, N.J.

"If she approved of the berries, they dug up the bush, brought it to Whitesbog, took cuttings and started propagating the bushes," Robbins said.

The finders got \$2 per bush and the distinction of having the bushes named after them.

"I had the Adams bush found by Jim Adams, the Harding bush

that was found by Ralph Harding, and the Dunphy bush that was found by Theodore Dunphy," White said.

A man named Rube Leek of Chatsworth found a bush with large, good quality berries. "They didn't want to call it the Rube and they didn't want to call it the Leek, so they called it the

## Group test-markets berry good, berry tasty products

By **BRENDAN SCHURR**  
Associated Press

MOUNT LAUREL, N.J. — Coming soon to a supermarket near you: blueberry iced tea.

Researchers at Rutgers University's Cook College in New Brunswick have created the tea and three other products as part of a plan to increase markets for blueberries.

Most blueberries grown in New Jersey are sold fresh and the rest are sold frozen for use in pies and other baked goods, said Brian Schilling, assistant director of research at Rutgers' Food Policy Institute.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1998 asked the school to try to develop new products to increase blueberry markets, Schilling said.

From the school's faculty, they recruited a product development expert, a food scien-

tist, a sensory evaluation specialist, a marketing specialist and agricultural economists.

Working with blueberry growers, the group came up with four products: blueberry iced tea, blueberry juice, a sports drink and a spread. The iced tea has so far been the most popular.

It has been sold at festivals at the college and at Whitesbog Village in Burlington County.

"At first, people just walked by and sort of scrunched their faces, but when a few adventurous people came by and tried it, we couldn't keep it cold, it was going so fast," Schilling said.

The group, under the direction of Adesoji Adelaja, Dean of Research at Cook College, is continuing research into the health benefits of blueberries. Studies have found that they are high in antioxidants and have antiviral properties, like cranberries, Schilling said.

Rubel," Robbins said.

That bush turned out to be "the keystone of blueberry breeding," White said.

Blueberry bushes from Whitesbog were sold across the country and in Canada. They have since become a major crop for several states and are grown in countries around the world.

Michigan cultivates more blueberries than any other state, then New Jersey. The berries contribute about \$36 million to the Garden State economy each year.

In 1997, U.S. farmers cultivated 83,300 tons of blueberries worth \$141 million, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.