

Garden State First In U.S. Production —

New Jersey's Blueberry Crop Begins Journey To Nation's Markets

By Betty Fleming
Times Food Editor

A tidal wave of sun-ripened blueberries is now making its way from New Jersey fields to markets near and far. Despite late frost and dry weather, the crop is coming in.

Sprinkled on cereal, in pancakes and muffins, eaten by the bowlful with heavy cream, blueberries make easy and most delightful eating — but it wasn't always so.

Cultivated blueberries didn't even exist 50 years ago. It took the efforts of two pioneers, Miss Elizabeth C. White, daughter of a Whitesbog cranberry grower, and Dr. Frederick V. Coville of the United States Department of Agriculture. Both now deceased, they are credited with making cultivated blueberries a reality . . . and a successful commercial crop. The White farm began shipping cultivated blueberries as early as 1924 and Burlington County

is now the biggest producer in the state with Atlantic a close second.

Wild swamp blueberries grew all around the White cranberry bogs years ago but the Whites lacked the scientific know-how to begin cultivation. Then Dr. Coville published a bulletin on "Experiments in Blueberry Culture." Soon these early blueberry enthusiasts, the lady farmer and the research man, were experimenting with wild bushes from the White fields.

Dollar Reward

Local residents were encouraged to hunt for wild berry bushes with a reward of one dollar for each bush of superior quality. These first bushes were given the names of their discoverers . . . Harding, Grover — even a "Sam" bush was added to the collection.

Years spent breeding, cross-breeding, improving methods of growing and propagating blueberries helped to produce the cultivated fruit now being

grown. Farmers also had to learn about the possibilities of the new crop as a commercial venture.

Today's familiar bowl of blueberries and cream may be traced back to the field where the berries are grown . . . and this is no hasty process. Blueberry bushes need five to ten years of growing to reach peak production.

Usually there are about 60 days between the time the bushes flower and bear fruit and during this time growers worry about rain, drought, disease and insects. Intricate systems of irrigation for plants are developed, low-flying planes crop dust them and machines spray the plants with insecticide. The grower uses every means at his disposal to get the finest yield from his acreage.

Then the big day arrives . . . time to harvest the crop. Do narrow, dusty roads come

truckloads of blueberry pickers. These can be local people or city folks who spend the Summer out-of-doors earning money and getting a healthy tan. Many drive up to the fields in their own cars, bringing transistor radios with them to make the hours of blueberry picking go faster.

Blueberry picking starts early in the day after the dew has had a chance to dry. If blueberries are picked wet, they lose their beautiful blue "bloom."

Each blueberry picker gets a ticket with numbers on it . . . to be punched every time he fills a bucket with blueberries. He's paid around 5 or 6 cents a pound and some of the more energetic pickers average 200 pounds a day.

It's a colorful sight to see more than a hundred blueberry pickers in a field, dressed in every kind of garb, from dungarees to pinafores. Always moving, the pickers are a lively group, talking, laughing as they go, sometimes stopping to rest and stretch a bit and exchange a few words with fellow workers. But then it's back to work . . . no one makes money just standing still.

Packing Process

An empty truck arrives at the field — and soon leaves with a load of blueberry-laden buckets. These go to the packing shed where women wait to pack the little berries into the little pint boxes Mrs. Homemaker will buy at her grocery store or supermarket.

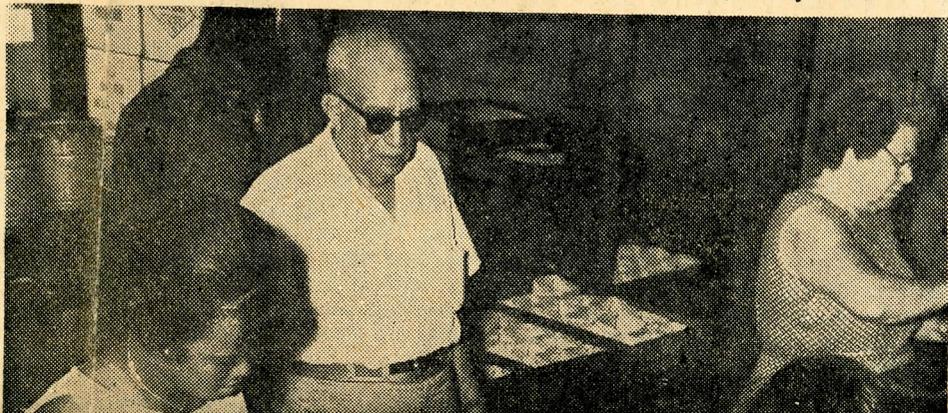
band. Now ready for the marketplace, the boxes of berries are placed on wooden trays and stored at cool temperature until the moment of departure. Next stop — the neighborhood grocery.

About 40 to 50 percent of all blueberries produced in this state are marketed by cooperatives. These are organizations owned by the growers themselves with each member getting one vote, no matter how many acres of berries he may have. With sales representatives in the major markets, such organizations help to assure distribution.

New Jersey Leads

And, lest anyone thinks that blueberries represent a small crop, make note of these figures — there are some 20,000 acres of fields under blueberry cultivation in the United States with about 7,000 acres in this state. Michigan comes next with 6,000 acres and then North Carolina with 3,200. Total volume of berries (both cultivated and wild) from these bushes can amount to between 75 and 85 million pounds . . . enough to brighten cereal bowls all over the nation. Galletta Brothers in Weymouth, Atlantic County, are top blueberry producers.

More than half the national crop of cultivated blueberries is marketed fresh, reaching consumers within about 36 hours from the time they were picked. Canneries and freezing plants get a large share of the re-



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A long rectangular tray of boxes is filled in easy fashion . . . by dumping a bucket of blueberries over it. A quick sweep of the hand and each pint box gets its full amount of berries.

Blueberries used to be packed in wooden boxes, some of them made of the cedar wood found in blueberry-growing areas. Times have changed and now berries are packed in pasteboard boxes. Lower in cost and lighter in weight, the new boxes allow berries to "breathe" and may mean that the fruit will keep longer in storage.

Square sheets of cellophane go over each box of berries, to be fastened down by pressing a wooden frame over the box and quickly applying a rubber

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Tips For Shoppers

When shopping for fresh blueberries, look for fruit that is plump, clean and dry. Plan to use your purchase as soon as possible, and store the fruit in an open container in the refrigerator to allow good circulation of air.

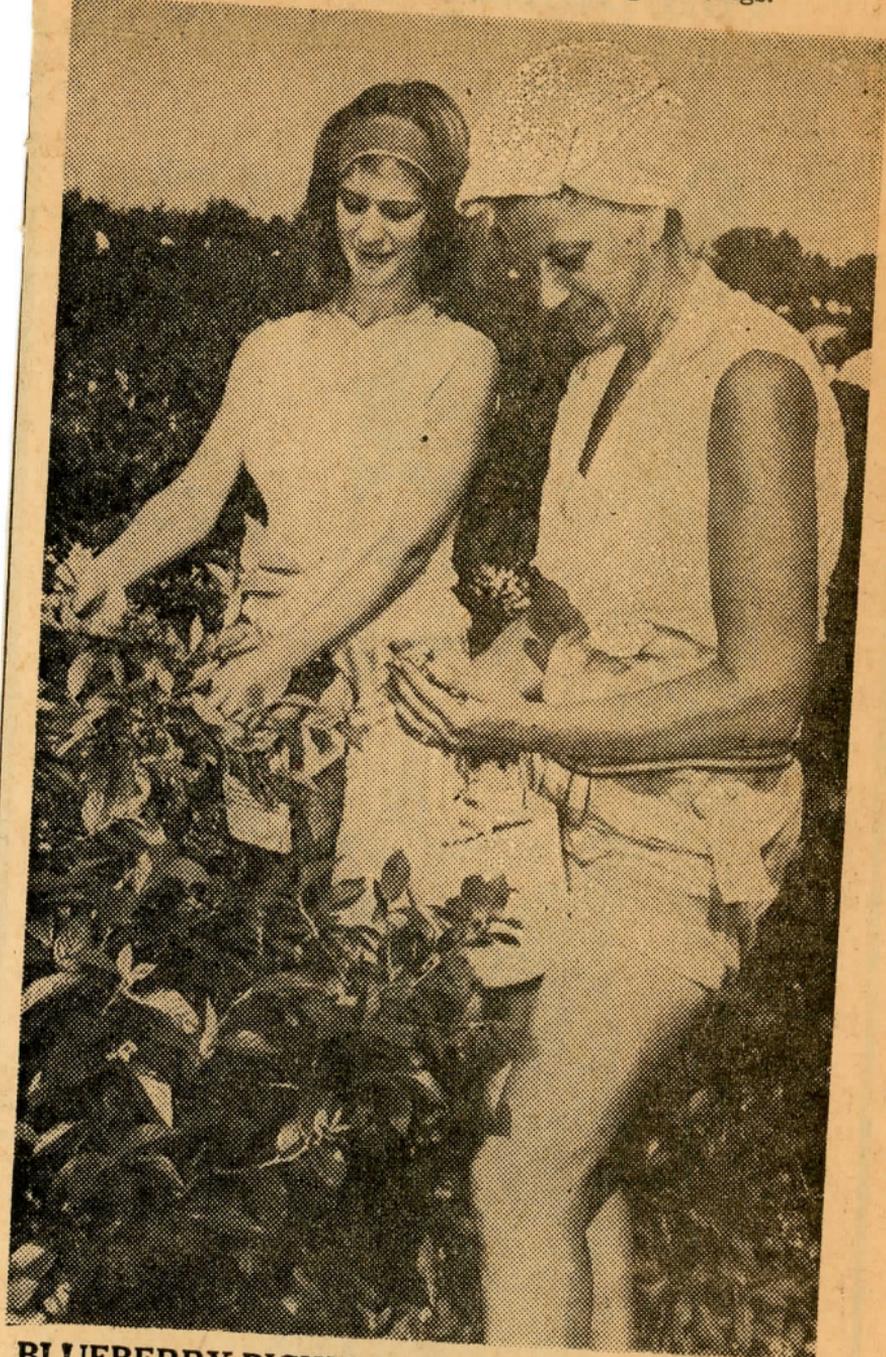
Do not wash blueberries until you are ready to use them. Wet berries quickly spoil. And, to avoid possible loss of juice, do not allow berries to stand in water.

Allow one pint of berries for four average servings.



TINY IDENTIFICATION LABELS, placed on each basket of berries, tell which grower produced them. Isaiah Haines, manager of J. J. White Incorporated, supervises the operation.

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BLUEBERRY PICKING must be done when the berries are dry to protect their "bloom." Mrs. Frances LaMacchia and her daughter, Mrs. Jackie Bartello of Philadelphia, show how the delicate fruit must be handled.

W



SUN SHINES BRIGHTLY on these Whitesbog pickers as they walk from bush to bush, selecting the ripe blueberries for tomorrow morning's cereal bowls. Some families come back year after year to work here.

berries come by



HEAPING PAILS OF BLUEBERRIES are poured by Ronald Jefferson into trays of empty pint baskets destined for the marketplace.