

Haskap and Honeyberry Update – 2007 to 2010

In the orchard, CREC has five Russian honeyberry selections, six haskap selections from Oregon and four Canadian haskap selections. All require cross pollination by a second cultivar. All seem fully hardy here and all are loved by the birds. Overhead netting is being used by growers and the research farm in Canada. You will not get ripe fruit without netting.

Russian Honeyberries: The upright Russian cultivars ‘Berry Blue’ and ‘Blue Belle’ are currently suggested as pollinators for the Canadian haskaps. These two cultivars are similar in flavor. ‘Berry Blue’ may reach 6-7 feet while ‘Blue Belle’ is smaller and picks easier. ‘Blue Belle’ berries may be ‘tickled’ off the branches while the other cultivars need to be plucked individually. These are considered some of the better tasting Russian cultivars according to Dr. Bob Bors, University of Saskatchewan – Saskatoon. To date, the cultivar ‘Kamchatka’ has not had good production.

‘Blue Moon’ and ‘Blue Velvet’ are low, mounding selections with fuzzy leaves. They have a nice rounded shape and the plants are a different subspecies. The fruit from these two varieties is large (0.8 to 1 gram each) but also more tart and bland. The fruit is carried under the leaves and does not seem to be bothered as much by birds.

Some Russian selections, like ‘Berry Blue’ and ‘Blue Belle’, have low chilling requirements and do best where it is cold for long periods of time. In warmer climates or where there are fluctuating temperatures, they break dormancy too early and flower before winter is done or bees are active. ‘Blue Moon’ and ‘Blue Velvet’ are better selections for warmer areas.

We feel like we detect a tiny amount of bitterness in some of the Russian cultivars, but it does not detract from their appeal. Flavors are gently sweet-tart with a unique mild berry flavor that encourages another taste, and yet another. When made into wine, the must smells strongly of strawberries, raspberries and blueberries. Delightful!

Oregon Haskaps: Our selections from Dr. Thompson are not commercially available; however, in the future they will be a good selection for warmer areas as they need a long chilling period before breaking dormancy. Dr. Thompson is 85-years old and continues her breeding efforts with few resources and volunteered help. She has been helped by Dr. Dan Barney, former superintendent of the University of Idaho Sandpoint Research & Extension Center. The facility was closed in 2010 due to budget cuts, ending years of US work on blueberry, huckleberry, honeyberry and tree breeding.

Our collaboration with Dr. Thompson provided her with important information about the cold hardiness of her selections. We continue to report our results to her.

Canadian Haskaps: The haskaps released by the University of Saskatchewan-Saskatoon in 2007 are very early selections from the breeding program. The two named cultivars, ‘Tundra’ and ‘Borealis’, will allow growers to become experienced with the fruit and to cultivate markets. ‘Tundra’ has a tougher skin and is better for machine harvesting and perhaps u-pick farms. ‘Borealis’ is more tender and flavorful and is recommended for home gardens. The university’s contacts in Japan have been very pleased with the fruit and consider it the best they have tasted.

These cultivars are crosses of Russian and Kuril Island stock. It is unknown if they are suitable for warmer climates. The breeding program is trying to create bigger plants that can produce more berries. There is a huge amount of variability in the crosses and the choices are numerous: Berry size, berry shape, flavor (sweet, sour, bitter, raspberry, blackberry, mulberry, rhubarb, Saskatoon and currant flavors to name a few!), plant size, anthocyanin content, picking ease, fruit-holding ability, etc.

The University of Saskatchewan-Saskatoon has the only program in North America that is exclusively breeding cold-hardy fruiting plants. The small royalty fee on each plant sold from the successful cherry and haskap breeding programs has provided the program with much needed funds for the first time in its 80-year history.

The Canadian haskaps at CREC are doing great. They have easily survived the winters and have grown robustly. Fruiting has been discouraged by pruning, though a crop is expected in 2011.