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APR 19, 2019

Goldenberry, new superfruit, grows in US



South America’s goldenberry is poised to be a new superfruit for North American consumers, but a USDA-funded study shows they can be grown in the U.S.

Rutgers University **plant biology researcher Edward Durner** is starting the second year of research into goldenberries as a crop for farm market and community supported agriculture in the Northeastern U.S. He gave a presentation on his work recently at the Mid-Atlantic Fruit & Vegetable Convention in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

Goldenberries (*Physalis peruviana*) are an annual crop. The fruits – about the diameter of a penny or dime – are yellow and tart with a unique tropical flavor, tasting “like a mixture of pineapple, strawberry, sour cherry and citrus,” according to Durner. The yellow fruit sometimes can be seen through a translucent, golden brown husk. They are closely related to ground cherries and tomatillos, and can be grown much like tomatoes, peppers or eggplant, started indoors and transplanted to a field after frost.

The fruit is thought to be catching on with North American consumers. Food processing giant Nestlé a year ago bought a majority stake in Terrifert, the world’s largest buyer of goldenberries. A news release from Nestlé called the goldenberries “an Andean superfood high in vitamins and antioxidants.”

“This investment allows us to strengthen our presence in fast-growing categories such as plant-based foods, beverages and healthy snacks, known as ‘superfoods’ due to their high natural nutrient content,” Nestlé Zone Americas CEO Laurent Freixe said in the release.



Durner also has noticed goldenberries popping up on cooking shows, at least once as a “secret ingredient” in a chef competition. A marketing effort in the U.S., the American Pichuberry Association, has also trademarked the name “Pichuberry” for goldenberries and would support growers that would adopt Pichuberrys as a new crop.

The excitement over a new superfruit is worth growers’ attention because currently they are not grown commercially in North America, Durner said.

“I think they have potential to be grown anywhere in North America,” he said.

In the first year of Durner's research, growers in the Northeast tried growing the berries. There was a problem with growers receiving the seed in time for planting, but those growers who had enough season to harvest the ripe fruit did have some favorable reports.

The plants are vigorous and need space to grow.

"They need to be at least 5 feet apart in the row," he said. "They need to be probably 7-9 feet between rows. These plants will fill that space up. They're a pretty large plant. They could become 10 feet wide in circumference and they easily get to 6 or 7 feet tall."

"Those folks who were able to harvest some fruit and try them, and have other people try them – most people really liked the flavor," Durner said. "Several of them actually liked them better than ground cherries, because they had a fruitier, more tart, fruit-like flavor than ground cherries."

Goldenberries and goldenberry seed are often confused with ground cherries.

"Ground cherries have more of a mellow flavor," he said.

Durner said a good way to tell the seed apart is to look at it after germination. Goldenberries are distinguished by being fuzzy when germinating.

During his second year of research, 116 growers in the Northeast and Midwest are planting goldenberries and sending him their feedback. Goldenberries need a long season to grow but if planted in time can be harvested in September and early October.

"I'm also focusing on possible methods of training and pruning to induce earlier flowering and fruiting, so the plants are more productive and they come in earlier in the season," Durner said. "That was probably the biggest complaint, if you want to call it a complaint, from the growers, is that they're such a long-season crop."

Growers interested in growing goldenberries can contact Durner at durner@sebs.rutgers.edu for more information.

— *Stephen Kloosterman, associate editor*

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