

Beach Plum Project Developing Niche

by Kara Lynn Dunn, adapted with permission from *Farming, the Journal of Northeast Agriculture*

Interest in growing and processing a fruit native to the coastline of the Northeastern US is being revived by Cornell University's Beach Plum Project. Project Manager Rick Uva of Cornell's Horticulture Department says the time is ripe for producing and marketing beach plums as a heritage specialty crop.

"The current coincidence of consumer demand for beach plums outstripping the supply, depressed cranberry and tree fruit prices prompting growers to consider alternative crops, and our increasing knowledge of beach plum management yields an unparalleled opportunity to launch a small, but regionally important, industry," Uva says.

The Beach Plum Project, funded by a Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education grant to Cornell University for 2001-2003, has fifteen locations growing beach plums in Massachusetts (8) and New York (7). Most operations are small diversified farms; some are organic; some are run by cranberry growers whose farms balance low cranberry bogs with adjacent upland areas suited to beach plums. The project's goals include developing beach plum production orchards, a germplasm collection, a quality control program, and a Beach Plum Consortium. Project participants include farms, small processing operations, and research and education institutions, including Cornell University, the University of Massachusetts, and Rutgers University. A germplasm collection has been built with seeds from native beach plum areas in Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Delaware.

Historically, Colonial settlers, and likely Native Americans, harvested wild fruit and made jams and jellies. Records show that in the 1930s and '40s, Cape Cod housewives processed 15,000 bushels of beach plums a year and, while strawberries sold for two cents a quart, beach plums sold for twenty-five cents a quart. Today on Cape Cod, grower Ron Smolowitz says his Coonamessett Farm's 100-percent-pure beach plum jam at \$5.50 per eight-ounce jar consistently outsells his blueberry, red and black raspberry, and strawberry jams priced at \$4.50 per jar.

Beach Plum Project researchers and collaborators are looking at processing options for jams, jellies, juice, wine, preserves and dried plum products. Samples developed and produced by the Food Venture Center of the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva; by upstate New York winemaker Steve Richards, and by the Chatham Jam and Jelly Shop, West Chatham, MA, with fruit from the Rutgers Cream Ridge Experiment Station, Rutgers, NJ, have been and will be tested by consumer and chef focus groups.

At the Food Venture Center, fruit from both wild and cultivated stands have been evaluated for quality, size, color, pulp yield, and for juice color, pH, acidity, and soluble solids. Results show a large variation in all measurements, prompting research into selecting and breeding for superior traits. Researchers will work with early innovator-farmers with field trials of beach plums to develop production methods to stabilize and increase yields and to control pests, to track plants to learn the best method for pollination and how soil differences influence taste and quality.

The Project's next steps, says Dr. Thomas Whitlow, an associate professor of horticulture at Cornell University and the Project's principal investigator, will be "to increase the growers' network to increase production acreage by five-fold, to organize that network of growers with processors, chefs and specialty outlets, and to soon add New Jersey growers to our field trials. We will be developing selection criteria based on processing and product quality characteristics identified by consumer focus groups, gourmet chefs, and specialty merchandisers and these criteria will drive selection and propagation of superior lines. We will continue to develop a strong, positive consumer identity and quality-conscious niche market demand for high-value beach plum products made with superior fruit."

For more information on the Beach Plum Project, contact Rick Uva, Cornell University, Department of Horticulture, 607-255-2746, rhu1@cornell.edu or visit www.beachplum.cornell.edu. ■



A variety of beach plum processors' products traditionally sell well on Cape Cod.

Heritage Plant Holds Promise for Northeast Growers

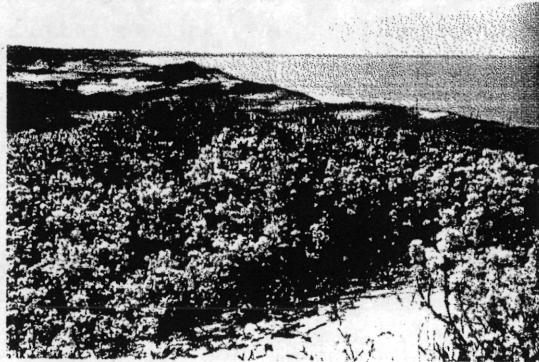


to grow a heavy fruit crop in its native harsh dune environment, performed well on research stations even during 2002's summer drought. Growers, who will wait three or four years for plants to bear fruit, may be able to shore up dry years

Left: Beach plums hold a heritage appeal for many New Englanders, and New York and Massachusetts farmers are rising to the challenge. "We see it as a crop for small farms with diversified operations," said Rick Uva, a Cornell researcher. **Middle:** The beach plum's pale, pink-white flowers in spring decorate coastal sand dunes from Maine through Maryland, a harsh native habitat that bodes well for the shrub's success during summer drought. **Bottom:** For centuries, coastal residents have produced jam, jelly, relishes, and wine from tart beach plums.

The wild beach plum, a gnarly shrub that grows on sand dunes between Maine and Maryland, offers the potential to both diversify Northeast farm operations and give growers a financial boost. Beach plums, about the size and color of purple grapes, make a tasty, unusual jam and, for many New Englanders, conjure up summers spent on Cape Cod. The fruit's popularity and historically based appeal—beach plums have been harvested and processed into spreads by locals for more than a century—translate into a highly marketable new commodity. SARE-funded researchers at Cornell University planted beach plum stock on research stations and 12 farms in 2002, and their field day and resulting publicity encouraged 22 more farmers to request beach plum plants. Participating farmers in Massachusetts and New York, many of them vegetable, berry and cranberry producers looking to diversify, are interested in this niche crop that lends itself so well to value-added products. "It's something unique," said Rick Uva, a Cornell project cooperater. "People like that it has a local history and mystique." The plant, hardy enough

and attract new customers. "There's a tremendous local interest historically," said Ron Smalowitz, a Falmouth, Mass., vegetable and berry grower who has grown a plot of beach plums since 1996 and improved and expanded his stock to 300 with help from the Cornell team. Smalowitz processes his own plum jam for sale at his farm stand. While his berry business remains brisk, beach plum jam retails for \$1 more per jar and "we can't keep it on the shelves," he said. Project leader Tom Whitlow predicts that restaurant chefs seeking unique and regional products will pay top dollar for the little plums. "It has a local panache," Whitlow said. [For more information about this Northeast Region project, go to www.sare.org/projects and search for LNE01-153.]



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