



## **Marketing juneberries / saskatoons as a new crop in the Northeast US: Consumer reactions and recommendations**

August 2010

During a three-day agriculture exposition in Upstate New York, more than 1,500 consumers tasted samples of juneberries (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) provided by Cornell Cooperative Extension. The tasting and marketing information collection was part of a larger project to potentially establish juneberries as a new crop in the Northeast US. This report summarizes the sampling procedures, consumer feedback and reactions, and recommends several strategies for introducing this unfamiliar berry to consumers and other potential buyers.

**Summary:** Juneberries have a promising future with consumers in the Northeast US, whether consumed fresh or processed into jams, syrups, pie filling, baked goods, or dehydrated forms. Most consumers in this study liked the flavor, the nutrition, or the combination of flavor and nutrition. The marketing challenge faced by juneberry sellers is the fruit's resemblance to domesticated blueberries. Many consumers presume the flavor to be the same, and find juneberries to taste like a bland blueberry; however, it is possible to influence consumers to expect a more compatible flavor & texture frame of reference. Some consumers felt the flavor experience with juneberries is superior to blueberries and expressed a preference for juneberries.

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- 1) Sampling materials and procedures**
  - 2) Flavor descriptions and reaction**
  - 3) Grouping consumer reactions based on gender and age**
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### **1) Sampling materials and procedures**

Setting: Empire Farm Days is an annual 3-day agriculture & rural land exposition in Upstate New York in early August. Participants are farm operators and employees, rural landowners, small town & suburban families with an interest in agriculture, agribusiness representatives, agency representatives, and researchers primarily from New York and other Northeast states. The sampling was conducted at a table in the Cornell Marketplace – a collection of small-scale food processors and farmers offering information and tastings of their products.

Berries: We brought 31 lbs. of individually quick frozen (IQF) juneberries / saskatoons that had been thawed completely to refrigerator temperature. The berries (variety

'Martin') were portioned into 1 oz. sampling cups in quantities of 8 – 10 berries per cup.

Set-up: The tabletop display included a sampling area and tray, three juneberry plants, and four framed full-color information panels depicting the name of the berries, photos of cultivation, and graphs comparing nutritional data from blueberries and juneberries. Participants could also take an information card that described juneberry planting / cultivation and nutritional information.

Sampling method: Individuals who approached the table were offered a single sample, with an explanation that the juneberry was a new potential crop and their feedback was desired. For example:

*Have you heard of juneberries before? This is a new berry crop we are thinking about introducing it to farms and consumers. We are interested first to get your reaction to the berry – its flavor, texture, and other aspects. Would you like to try a sample? What do you think of the berry? How would you describe its flavor? Would you consider purchasing these berries if offered at farm markets?*

Many participants had subsequent questions about the berries, their uses and cultivation, their origin, nutritional composition, and growth habit. These questions were answered and provided further feedback about the prospects of juneberries as a commercial crop.

Participants participated in the sampling at a rate of 60+ samples per hour, with as many participants being queried directly as possible. In all, 1,528 samples were distributed; verbal feedback was registered from approximately two-thirds of the participants. We did not attempt to acquire numerical or strictly quantitative data given the casual flow of people typical of exposition events.

## **2) Flavor descriptions and reaction**

Juneberries / saskatoons look very similar to blueberries (*Vaccinium* spp.) and participants readily used their life-long experience with blueberries to compare and contrast juneberry flavor and texture. Blueberries are widely available as a fresh crop in August and were a dominant frame of reference in this tasting / marketing project. As described later in this report, the reaction of the consumer to juneberries was substantially influenced by changing this frame of reference.

The following flavor descriptors were frequently mentioned:

- like a mild blueberry
- cherry / black cherry
- cranberry, but not tart
- not very sweet
- different
- blackcap
- mild
- juicy
- bland
- wild
- raisin
- tea / almond

The texture of the juneberries was noted by almost all participants, since juneberries have a higher solids content than most berries, especially the IQF / thawed berries:

- heavy skin
- woody
- a lot of body
- dense
- thick
- firm
- solid / pulpy
- chewy

Overall responses to the total juneberry tasting experience indicate a fairly positive experience with the flavor and texture, but not universally popular. There was a small, but notable minority – about 15 percent of all participants – who felt the juneberry did not meet their expectations for a fruit consumption experience and felt that juneberries would not make an appealing crop.

### **3) Grouping consumer reactions based on gender and age**

This project did not set out to distinguish groups of customers regarding juneberry marketing, but after the multiple samples, we noted distinctive demographic trends in reaction to juneberries / saskatoons:

#### Children and adolescents (16 years and younger):

Juneberries / saskatoons sampled in this project were nearly universally liked and found desirable by young people. More than 150 samples were offered to school-aged youth and only one or two reacted negatively to the flavor. All others reacted positively, even in contradiction to parents or adult guardians who did not find the berries quite so tasty. This group was more likely than most to use terms like “sweet” and “juicy.”

Younger children would tend to smile and nod after tasting; adolescents often expressed outward enjoyment of the fruit (“Mom, try these. . . they’re really good!”). Several adolescents (11 – 14 years) commented on the nutrition information, acknowledging the appeal of a nutrient-dense fruit, even if the fruit did not offer a robust flavor. Teenagers were much less likely than adults to compare juneberries directly to blueberries and judged the fruit on its own.

#### Young adults (18 – 26 years):

Young adult females seemed more likely than any other group to openly express a preference for juneberries over blueberries. Juneberries were almost 100 percent favorable to college-aged females. Females and males found the concentration of nutrition appealing, even if the flavor was somewhat mild. Young adult males were generally favorable toward juneberries, but a few outwardly rejected the fruit as unappealing.

#### Parents and middle-aged adults (27 – 60 years):

Male adults had the most variable reaction to first-time juneberry tasting in this project. Responses ranged from obvious disfavor (“Ugh, these taste like wood”) to highly approving (“Thumbs up! Plant more!”), and equally ranging on all parts of this

spectrum. Many adult males felt the nutrition concentration of juneberries mitigated its lack of robust flavor and would accept the trade off (less flavor but good nourishment) and still purchase the berries. Adult males commonly suggested using juneberries in baked goods, such as pies, breads, and muffins, or in combination with more familiar produce such as blueberries or rhubarb. Adult men were most likely to inquire about growing juneberries for home use and often predicted that fresh (not frozen / thawed) juneberries would be much more appealing to them. Adult men also tended to rate the berry bland or dull early in the tasting, but subsequently grew to sense and approve of the flavor after a few moments (“They kind of grow on you”).

Adult females were less varied in their responses and generally more positive than adult males. Responses from adult females ranged from unimpressed (“they’re kind of bland”) to highly approving (“I love these berries!”) with the majority feeling the flavor is satisfactory, and good nutrition content a bonus. Females appeared substantially influenced by nutrition information. Many adult women followed up the tasting with questions and suggestions about baking uses.

Parents (aged 28 – 45) tended to find the berries flavorful and generally appealing enough to want to purchase them, more so than adults with no children present.

#### Older adults (60 years and older):

Older adults expressed mild interest in the berry flavor; however, they too appeared strongly influenced by nutrition information. Both older adult males and females first felt the berry was not sweet enough, but eventually the flavor was considered acceptable and even agreeable as they tasted more berries.

#### **4) Pricing and price premiums**

Periodically, participants were asked to comment on their price expectation for fresh juneberries / saskatoons after they had tasted a sample. The resemblance of juneberries to blueberries seemed to direct these consumers; they often indicated that they would be willing to pay just as much as blueberries or other similar fruits, but not more.

Probing price premiums, several dozen participants were asked if the high nutritional value of juneberries should influence the price. Most said they would only tolerate a small price premium (about 10%) or no premium at all. Many felt there could be a market with a higher disposable income or strongly oriented toward healthier foods that would be willing to pay any more than a 10% premium, based on nutrient content factors.

#### **5) Recommendations to approach direct marketing**

DO:

- Develop a few conspicuous table-top signs or hand cards to indicate the name of the fruit, so consumers are immediately aware that they are not blueberries.
- Offer a small tasting sample from a portion cup to acquaint consumers with the flavor and texture of this fruit.
- Provide signage with easy-to-understand nutritional information – more graphics than text.
- Prepare a list of the various processed or culinary uses of juneberries to augment fresh eating. Suggest some ideas from this list during an introductory spiel.
- Price juneberries comparable to other small fruit; they are not likely to be perceived as distinct or special enough to warrant a substantial price premium.

#### DON'T

- Don't simply say "they are not blueberries" since this contradicts all the evidence that a consumer has prior to tasting.
- Don't condescend an individual who does not find juneberries tasty or interesting.
- Don't embellish the nutrition aspects of juneberries or make medical claims related to the fruit.

#### Introducing juneberries/saskatoons to curious customers

Most consumers have not yet heard of juneberries / saskatoons, or know very little about them. People who have never seen nor heard of juneberries/ saskatoons will immediately assume they are another form of blueberry. This is helpful since blueberries are a very popular fruit, but the obvious differences in flavor and texture will leave many potential customers confused and possibly dissatisfied. Another common assumption is that juneberries are an interspecific hybrid or "invented fruit."

Juneberry vendors should establish an accurate and convincing frame of reference for any new customer. In this project, we found the following phrases much more likely to produce a favorable impression of juneberries, prior to tasting:

- "more closely related to cherries than blueberries"
- "a well-liked Canadian berry catching on in the US"
- "native to North America"
- "dark-skinned, and full of nutrients"
- "distinct flavor and texture – more like a wild berry than a blueberry"

A tasting sample is very important to introduce the fruit prior to a sale, even if the customer has tasted juneberries before. There are enough difference in flavor and eating experience among juneberry varieties to warrant regular tasting opportunities. Tasting samples do not need to be large – our samples of 8-10 berries in a standard portion container were adequate for nearly everyone who wanted to try the berries for the first time. Portion cups allow for better sanitation, portability, and more efficient

use of fruit for sampling. We discovered that each pound of juneberries averaged 52 samples. At a retail price of \$3.25 / pint, each portion uses about 15 cents of berries and container materials.

#### Pricing juneberries at the farm stand or u-pick farm

Feedback from consumers in New York (summer 2010) strongly indicated that juneberry retail prices will be influenced by other small fruits, such as raspberries, strawberries, and blueberries. Due to its novelty and superior nutrition composition, juneberries could be priced on the higher end of common retail prices for these fruit. Fortunately, the fresh juneberry harvest and sales period is over before blueberries are ripe so they will not be directly compared to blueberries; yet they should still be priced comparably.

E.g.: Blueberries retail for \$2.75/ pint; juneberries would retail for \$2.75 - 3.25 / pint

Whether the variable and fixed costs of production can be supported profitably in the Northeast US by this comparative pricing method is not yet known.

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If you have further questions or comments about this study or the overall Small-scale Juneberry Establishment and Marketing Project, please contact:

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