

## Haskap – the prairie BLUEberry

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As fruit growers, most of you likely have some awareness of a new prairie fruit crop known as honeyberry or haskap. For those of you speak Latin, haskap gets the moniker: *Lonicera caerulea edulis*. Prairie nurseries have always sold the same species (Sweetberry honeysuckle) as an ornamental, but haskap has been bred for its large, nutritional fruit. By combining Russian and Japanese germplasm, the University of Saskatchewan has developed a number of outstanding cultivars with fruit size up 2.5 grams.

Haskap fruit has the colour and texture of blueberry, but has a unique oval shape resembling a macaroni noodle. It's taste is in a class by itself with a wonderful blend including flavours of raspberry and blueberry. The fruit needs no destemming or pitting and is ready for fresh-eating or processing right off of the bush. Local companies have been developing unique haskap recipes including jam, juice and wine. Haskap fruit can also be individually quick frozen and used in baking or breakfast cereal.

Haskap is early to flower with full bloom by early to mid May. Amazingly, open blooms can be exposed to temperatures as low as -7 C and still produce fruit. Early blooming means early fruit picking and in southern Manitoba, haskap fruit is ready for picking by the last two weeks in June. Local fruit in June is a distinct niche as there is nothing else available until the strawberries arrive in early July. For orchard growers, this also spreads out the workload over the summer months and more importantly provides a crop that ripens before the annual invasion of Spotted Wing Drosophylla (SWD). SWD is an invasive pest that lays its eggs in developing fruits of raspberry, tart cherry and other mid-season fruit crops.



At Riverbend Orchards, we've been working with haskap since spring of 2010, when we planted our first rows of 'Borealis' and 'Tundra'. We have been impressed with their winter hardiness, growth rate, resistance to pests (including deer) and of course, consistent fruit production. This past summer, we had a bumper crop of fruit enabling us to supply wholesale customers in Winnipeg. The feedback was impressive, and we decided to expand our haskap acreage in 2017. We hope to hit the ground with 2000 plants early this summer, with the majority being a new cultivar called 'Aurora'.

It should be mentioned that while haskap has very few pest problems, that fruit-eating birds can devour an entire crop. Bird netting is an absolute must to protect the ripe fruit from Waxwings and Robins. We use 7' x 100' rolls which can be draped over the row and are readily rolled up for storage. Some orchardists have even constructed outdoor rooms with netting and scaffolding to protect their haskap fruit. Perhaps as new cultivars are developed with larger fruit that are "more than a beak full", bird predation will be less of an issue.

Riverbend Orchards has signed on as a licensed propagator of the University of Saskatchewan haskap cultivars including 'Aurora', 'Borealis', 'Honey Bee' and 'Tundra'. We have also received stock plants of the newest set of haskap cultivars that includes: 'Boreal Beast', 'Boreal Beauty' and 'Boreal Blizzard'. Every June we propagate about 10,000 haskap plants from softwood cuttings collected in our own orchard. Demand for these plants has been strong and we have shipped our plants across Canada as well as the northern United States.

Feel free to contact me with any questions you might have regarding growing haskap in Manitoba. I can be reached by e-mail at [riverbend@mymts.net](mailto:riverbend@mymts.net)

