

## **Haskap Production – Learning from our neighbors.**

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If there's one thing I've learned about farming it's that we don't always need to reinvent the wheel; sometimes all we need to do is peek over the fence to get some good ideas. In the last year or two, the majority of calls I've received from new farmers have been related to haskap production. If you haven't heard of this berry yet, you will. It's also called an edible blue honeysuckle or honeyberry, or by its' French name 'Camerise'. It recently gained popularity in Canada after a researcher at the University of Saskatchewan (Dr. Bob Bors) developed a number of varieties in his small fruit breeding program. The berries are very high in antioxidants and provide similar health benefits to our other more well-known berry powerhouses like blueberries and cranberries.

While the crop has been gaining popularity in Nova Scotia, there remain many questions on the best way to grow and harvest the berries. As with any 'new' crop, it takes a few years of trial and error to determine the best growing practices and because most of the popular varieties were developed in Saskatoon, this may pose new challenges to growing in a maritime climate.

Researchers and growers in Quebec have been working with haskap for about 8 years; so in the summer of 2015 a couple of Perennia staff decided to go to the haskap growing region of Lac St. Jean to visit a few farms who have been successful thus far.

A few 'lessons' that we learned from our neighbors:

1. Weed Control is extremely important in the first 3-5 years of getting the crop established. Most growers in Quebec are planting into beds that have been covered with black plastic mulch to eliminate competition from weeds and installing drip irrigation to manage moisture and fertility to the plants. Weeds will still grow around the base of the plants and need to be hand weeded on a regular basis.
2. Soils and Fertility – despite one of the common names of its' 'wild' relatives – swamp honeysuckle - this plant really does not like 'wet feet', so drainage is very important. Look for a site with well-drained soil, good organic matter, and a pH of at least 6 – 6.5. Soils should be tested for fertility and amended before planting.
3. Pollination – haskap plants require pollination from plants that are not genetically similar, so there are a number of 'pollinator' varieties that also produce fruit but serve a greater purpose in pollinating the main varieties. As a general rule if you are relying on native bee populations, these pollinator plants should be planted throughout the row (every third or fourth plant) in order to provide maximum opportunity for pollination. For larger plantings designed to be mechanically harvested, it may be more feasible to plant every third row with pollinator varieties, recognizing that you should bring in more bees during bloom.
4. Pests – Most growers in Nova Scotia are having to fence out large animals like deer who find tender haskap buds delicious in the winter and spring and then as the berries start to ripen, bird netting is required. Our maritime climate is also perfect for the development of Powdery Mildew (a fungal leaf disease). While no pesticides are registered yet for haskap, work is being done to find products suitable for both conventional and organic production.
5. Harvest – if you have a few plants in the backyard, harvesting by hand is fine. If you are planning on growing more than a few acres, you really should be thinking about mechanizing

the harvest. A grower cooperative in Quebec has purchased a Joanna 3 Berry Harvester which is rented out to growers and can harvest up to 8-10 acres a day. If you are planning on hand picking – you'll need a good labour force, one grower told us it takes five people to harvest one acre per day.

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