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Northwest blueberry production meets skyrocketing demand

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Blueberries in the Northwest are on a roll.

“Being a part of the blueberry industry over the years has been like riding a rocket ship,” said Bryan Ostlund, administrator of the Oregon Blueberry Commission.



Indeed, there has been record-breaking season after record-breaking season. Oregon shipped 134

million pounds of blueberries last season and Washington, a state that produced only 18 million pounds in 2006, rang in at 130 million pounds in 2018.

“What’s remarkable is not how big the Northwest blueberry industry has become but how massive the demand for blueberries has been,” said Ala Schreiber, executive director of the Washington Blueberry Commission. “All those blueberries found a home.”

As the per capita consumption of blueberries in North America continues to grow faster than any other berry category, a reported 70 percent of the high bush blueberry production in the United States is currently in the West.

“Increasingly, blueberries are a West Coast thing,” said Schreiber. “There are enough plants in the ground that in five years Washington could be at or above 200 million pounds.”

“The wind is definitely at our back right now,” added Ostlund. “Blueberries have a lot going for them, in addition to all the positive health messaging is the fact that blueberries are convenient and ready to eat.”

As one might expect, organics are also a major part of the blueberry deal with nearly 25 percent of Oregon blueberries being organic. In Washington, 90 percent of fresh blueberry production is organic. “It’s a fairly advanced industry because most of Washington’s blueberry plantings are young,” said Schreiber, “so we are growing the latest varieties and packing with the newest technology.”

If there’s pressure anywhere in Northwest blueberry production, it’s almost certainly the availability of labor. While wages are still competitive in organic blueberry operations, workers can still be hard to come by and mechanized harvesting is not entirely ideal for fresh market blueberries.

“Most blueberries experience a diminished shelf life when mechanically harvested,” said Schreiber. “But the technology is getting better, and in the not-too-distant future blueberries will largely be machine harvested.”

Productivity in the Northwest is high, so there are plenty of blueberries that need picking. With 20,000 pounds or more being harvested per acre, the region has some of the highest yields in the world.

This season, blueberries from Oregon and Washington are on track to continue their skyward trajectory, delivering more of that impressive volume. “At this point, it’s looking like a banner year. Pollination saw great conditions and we’ve had warm weather to stimulate the plants,” said Ostlund. “It’s been this nice slow build for plant development. Perfect blueberry weather — not too cold, not too hot.”

“What’s exhilarating is that people are continuing to plant blueberries. It’s dizzying; the rate of growth and development, the investment in plants and infrastructure,” added Schreiber. “Blueberries have one of the most dramatic growth curves of any perennial crop, and it doesn’t appear anywhere close to falling off. It’s exciting.”

