

An Evergreen Huckleberry Industry near the Oregon Coast Early in the 20th Century

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Introduction

The evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum* Pursh) is an important ornamental plant in northwestern United States landscapes. The native range of this species extends along the Pacific coast from central California north through Oregon and Washington, USA into British Columbia, Canada (1, 5). While an excellent ornamental, *Vaccinium ovatum* has recently been planted in Oregon's Willamette Valley for commercial fruit production. Although this may seem like a new crop for Oregon, commercial production, at least on a small scale, has a long history in this region.

Saving the Evergreen Huckleberry

In 1918 Frank Moll, a Portland, Oregon office worker left his job and set out to save the evergreen huckleberry from extinction. Moll and his wife found the perfect valley for a homestead about 15 miles from the Pacific Ocean, at the base of Pioneer Mountain near Toledo, Oregon. They constructed a sturdy log cabin and Frank began exploring the Oregon coastal mountains, sampling wild huckleberry plants from the California border to the north edge of Lincoln County. Those plants with the largest and best tasting berries were collected and transplanted to the Moll homestead. After visiting Moll in the mid 1920s, Frances Twining wrote in a Portland newspaper article "The house is of logs, hewn from the very site where it stands; and massed in with other shrubs and in long rows

in the nursery were the particular specimens of the Pacific coast huckleberry that we had come to see (4)."

During the early 20th century, florists around the United States found the attractive evergreen shoots of this *Vaccinium* species to be an exotic addition to cut flower arrangements. Entrepreneurs in western Oregon gathered or purchased wild-collected shoots and shipped them by the train-car load to buyers across the country, as far east as New York (3, 6). Moll was concerned that the indiscriminate gathering of 10-15 year old huckleberry stems could not be sustained, and he invested considerable effort in learning to propagate and cultivate *V. ovatum* plants for their foliage and landscape use as well as for their fruit. In a Sunset Magazine article he wrote in 1933, Moll warned that the increasing demand for foliage would be met with a decreasing supply due not only to the wholesale harvesting of the foliage, but also to expansion of highways, increased population and aggressive logging enterprises. Moll extolled the ornamental virtues of the exceptionally durable huckleberry stems with their "daintily serrated leaves of a slightly waxy appearance which the sun bronzes to assume the varied tints so highly esteemed by the florist." He also promoted his own nursery operation. Once his homestead was well established, he proudly announced that it was finally possible to "procure plants from a reliable grower, plants that have a root

¹USDA Agricultural Research Service, National Clonal Germplasm Repository, Corvallis, Oregon 97333. Acknowledgements: Thanks to Morris X. Smith (1910-1998) for bringing me samples in 1996 from a huckleberry selection he had made and for sharing stories about a small huckleberry industry near the Oregon coast in the 1930s. Thanks to Jan Christiansen and William Rogers of the Lincoln County, Oregon, Extension Service for help locating Will Ogren, present owner of the Frank Moll homestead, and to Mr. Ogren for his enthusiasm toward preserving this horticultural relic and for providing historic news clippings.

system that takes away all chance of a failure in the transplanting that lack of which, up to the present time, has confined this shrub to its native haunts (3).”

Learning to Cultivate the Evergreen Huckleberry in Western Oregon

During the 1930's Moll developed methods for propagating huckleberries “under glass” in his custom built greenhouses. He also continued to expand his plantation, learning by trial and error that these plants would not tolerate commercial fertilizers. *Vaccinium ovatum* thrives under the moist growing conditions in Oregon's rainforest, nurtured by fog and clouds in the coastal valleys and tolerant of the shade of surrounding forest. Propagating this crop was not simple. Moll had some success transplanting superior specimens from the wild, and growing young plants from seed; however, transplanted plants were very slow to recover and seedlings took many years to reach a marketable size. It was not until he tried rooting softwood cuttings in the heated beds of his glasshouse that Moll was able to produce viable nursery plants. He faced challenges working with a slow-growing plant that can take as long as 15 years to reach maturity. During the many years it took for his plants to increase fruit production, Moll worked on developing markets for his fresh berries along the Pacific Coast. He established customers at restaurants, bakeries and fruit markets in the Willamette Valley and ultimately he shipped fruit by ocean ferry as far south as San Francisco (Morris X. Smith, personal communication). Moll also experimented with products such as pie filling and soft drinks. Harvesting and sorting the berries, however, was his biggest challenge. The fruit needed to be hand-picked, the ripe berries separated from the green ones, and the sound fruit gently packed for market without bruising. Moll devised and constructed an elaborate fruit cleaning machine to separate the larger berries from twigs, leaves and tiny fruit. A photograph of Moll with his machine

appeared in the Lincoln County newspaper in October, 1953 (Figure 1). Moll apparently hired local children to pick the ripening berries in the late summer before the school year began (Morris X. Smith, personal communication). His two acres of huckleberries after 20 years in the ground, produced a little more than a ton of marketable berries a year, and were sold at a premium price to cover the high production costs (2).

The ‘Huckleberry Sanctuary’ Today

Frank Moll died in 1960. Between 1961 and 1998 the property had two different owners, neither of whom shared Frank Moll's interest in huckleberry cultivation. The two acre huckleberry plantation was not maintained, but it was also not removed. During the 1960's and 70's, local beekeeper and fruit historian Morris X. Smith from nearby Chitwood made frequent trips to Moll's abandoned huckleberry farm to pick berries. Smith also propagated several plants from the old Moll property that he found to have exceptional fruit size and quality and planted them in his garden in nearby Chitwood. By the 1980's the plants on Frank Moll's old huckleberry farm were so large that the planting was impenetrable, especially for Smith who was then in his late 60s and handicapped from a mining accident during his younger days. In 1998, Will Ogren purchased the property and set about restoring Moll's log cabin and barn and unearthing many horticultural treasures. Ogren calls his property “The Huckleberry Sanctuary” and has cleared a trail around the perimeter of the huckleberry plot and a tunnel through its center (Figure 2). Moll planted his huckleberry plants every four feet in rows that were six feet apart. The plants today are more than 8 feet tall and completely intertwined. Even the weedy Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus armeniacus/procerus* P.J. Müll. ex Boulay) and red alder seedlings (*Alnus rubra* Bong.) have not been very successful at penetrating the *Vaccinium ovatum* thicket.

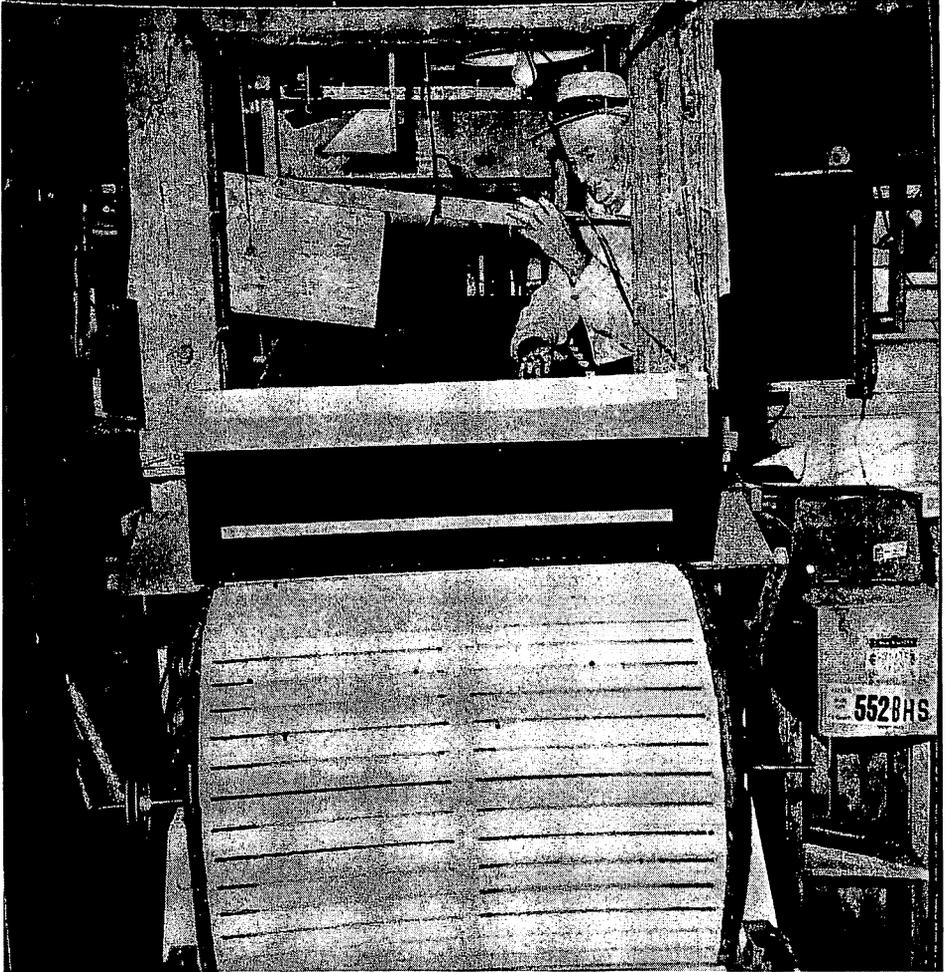


Figure 1. Frank Moll and his berry cleaning machine (1953 Lincoln County Leader). The caption read “F.N. Moll - Huckleberry Grower. Here he cleans berries on a machine he devised and constructed himself.”

During a tour of the property with Ogren in January 2003, we found many of the plants to be afflicted with a stem deforming rust disease caused by *Pucciniastrum goeppertianum* (Kühn) Kleb. This fungus requires a true fir such as Grand Fir (*Abies grandis* (Doug.) Forbes) as an alternate host. Symptoms on huckleberry include stem proliferation (witches’ broom) and brown spongy swelling of infected stem tissues (Figure 3). The disease reduces fruit

production and may be considered unsightly, but it does not kill the plant.

Today Ogren’s farm is a natural laboratory, a repository of superior huckleberry selections collected from throughout the Oregon Coast Range nearly a century ago. Hidden in Frank Moll’s long-overgrown huckleberry plantation are many specimen plants with diverse ornamental and fruit characteristics, growth habits, disease resistance and other qualities yet to be discovered.



Figure 2. Will Ogren kneeling in tunnel cut through 80 year old huckleberry plot, January, 2003.



Figure 3. Huckleberry stem rust caused by the fungus *Pucciniastrum goeppertianum*.

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