

Perspective on the U.S. and Global Blueberry Industry

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Abstract

Total worldwide blueberry area in 2005 was 69,948 ha for lowbush (all in North America) and 43,765 ha for highbush. Only half of the lowbush area is harvested annually. Highbush blueberry area increased about 21% in the last two years. North America accounted for about 69% of the planted highbush area, 67% of fresh production and 94% of processed production in the world. Worldwide, 63% of total highbush production was marketed as fresh fruit. The southern hemisphere produced only 3% of the world's processed blueberries, but 15% of the fresh. The opportunities for growth, in this region, are large as they export fresh fruit to the Northern Hemisphere predominantly in the "off-season". The market for fresh and processed blueberries continues to look strong.

Blueberries (*Vaccinium* spp.) are a major crop worldwide. Strong markets for processed and fresh fruit have resulted in good returns for growers and an increase in planted area. New cultivars, better adapted to "non-traditional" growing areas, have expanded production worldwide. Blueberries are now commercially grown on six continents.

North America

Lowbush blueberries (mainly *Vaccinium angustifolium* Ait.) are harvested from managed wild stands in the northeastern U.S. and Canada. In 2003, there were 69,948 ha of lowbush blueberry in North America, a 33% increase in the past 10 years (2). Since lowbush blueberries are native, this increase in area reflects a larger portion of the native stands being managed for harvest due to positive blueberry markets. There were 26,483 ha of lowbush blueberry in the U.S., mainly in Maine, and 43,465 ha in Canada, mainly in Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. Only half of the total area of lowbush blueberries is harvested annually because of alternate year pruning practices (3). Total lowbush blueberry production in North America in 2005 was 74,500 metric tonnes (MT) with approximately 99% sold for processing. Production of lowbush blueberry has increased in the last 10 years (Fig. 1), partly due to increased area managed, but also to

a higher average yield. Yield per hectare has increased with greater use of bee hives for pollination, irrigation, fertilization, and better weed management practices (3).

Highbush blueberries including northern highbush (*Vaccinium corymbosum* L.), southern highbush (complex hybrids based largely on *V. corymbosum* and *V. darrowi* Camp.) and rabbiteye (*V. virgatum* Ait.) are grown in western, eastern, and southern North America. Highbush blueberry production has increased exponentially from 1975 (Fig. 1). This increase is a result of greater area harvested, better yielding cultivars, and the development of production systems that improve yield. The total production of highbush blueberries in North America in 2005 was a record 139,000 MT (Table 1), a 32% increase over total production in 2003 (2).

Total planted area in North America in 2005 was 30,185 ha, an increase of 11% from the 27,105 ha reported in 2003 (2). The regions with the largest increase in acreage in the last two years were the west (+ 1,860 ha), the southern region (+ 1,188 ha), and the Midwest (+ 486 ha). There was very little change in area in the northeast in the last two years (+ 30 ha). Area in the last 10 years has increased almost 50% in North America.

In 2005, 55% of total highbush blueberry production was marketed fresh (Fig. 2). Positive findings from health-related research on

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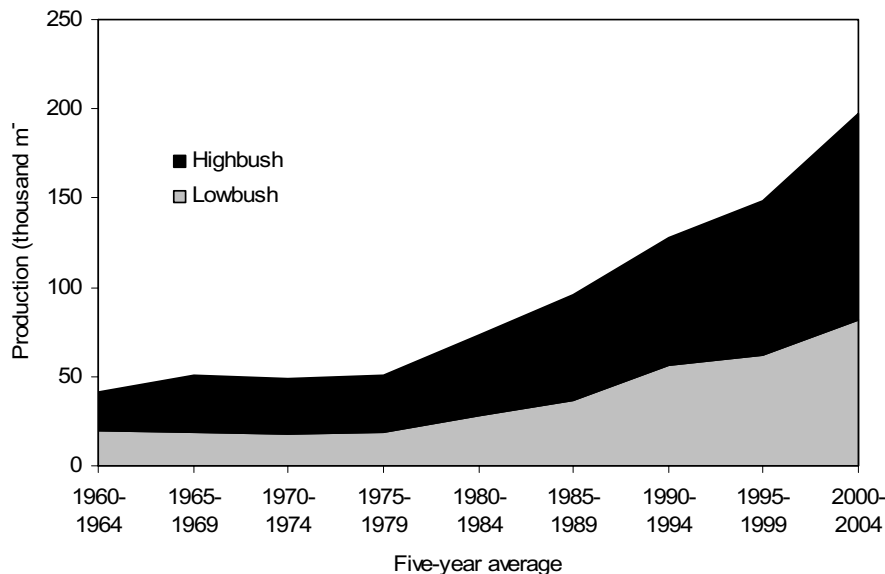


Figure 1. Production (thousand MT) of highbush and lowbush blueberries in North America from 1960 through 2004 (source North American Blueberry Council).

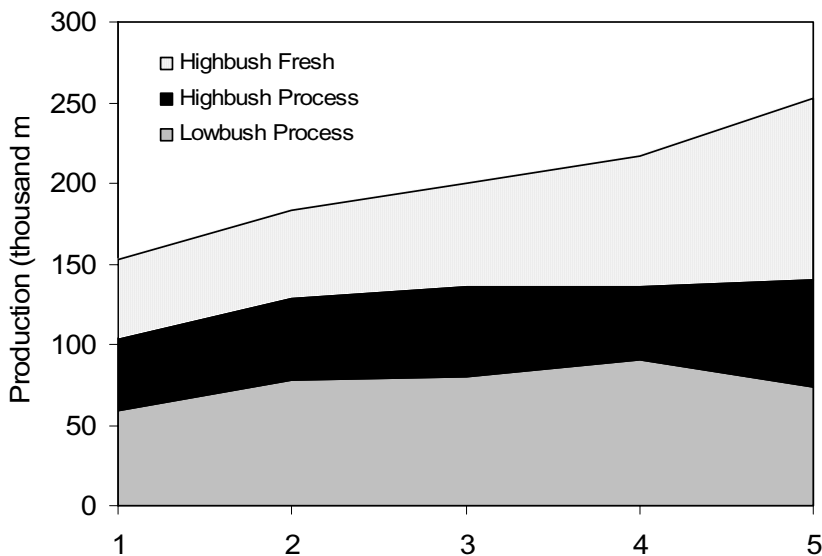


Figure 2. Production of highbush and lowbush blueberries (thousand MT) for fresh and processed markets in North America from 1995 through 2005 (source North American Blueberry Council).

blueberries, including age-related diseases and oxidative stress, have been used in marketing efforts. The growth in markets and production is highly related to the positive health benefits of blueberries used in marketing campaigns starting in 1997; demand for blueberries in the last 10 years has exceeded supply.

Outside North America

In 2005, there were an estimated 43,765 ha of highbush blueberries planted worldwide with a total production of 179,000 MT, a 25% and 38% increase in area and production, respectively, to what was reported in 2003 (1).

South America accounted for about 17% of the world area in 2005 (Table 2). This region has had the largest growth in the last two years, almost doubling from the 3,825 ha planted in 2003 (1). About 60% of the planted area is in Chile and most of the remaining area in Argentina. Fruit are harvested by hand, from the end of September through April depending on country and region, with most exported for fresh market to the northern hemisphere.

About 10% of the world blueberry area was in Europe in 2005 (Table 2). Area in this region has increased by almost 810 ha since 2003 (1) with most of the growth in Poland, Germany, The Netherlands, and France. Total production in 2005 was 19,600 MT, almost double that reported in 2003 (1). About 95% of the total production in Europe is marketed

fresh and stays within Europe.

Australia and New Zealand accounted for about 2% of world blueberry area in 2005. There were about 300 ha planted in South Africa (Table 2); the area reported by Strik for 2003 (1) may have been high, as no known plantings have been removed.

There is tremendous interest in blueberries in Asia. Plantings are expected to increase steadily in this region. In 2005, this region had 710 ha, 162 ha more than that reported in 2003 (1). However, production is still low at 1,300 MT (Table 2).

Summary

Total highbush blueberry area, worldwide, has increased 7,534 ha (about 21%) in the last two years (1). North America accounted for about 69% of the planted area in the world in 2005, down from 75% in 2003 (2). North America produced 67% and 94% of the world fresh and processed highbush blueberries, respectively, in 2005. Ninety-two percent of the highbush production is in the northern hemisphere. Worldwide, 63% of total highbush production was marketed as fresh fruit in 2005, with most of this (85%) produced in the northern hemisphere. The southern hemisphere produced only 3% of the world processed blueberries, but 15% of the fresh. The opportunities for growth in this region are large as they export fresh fruit to the Northern Hemisphere in predominantly the "off-season". The market for fresh and processed blueberries continues to look strong

Table 1. Area and production of highbush blueberries in North America in 2005.

Region	Hectares	Production (thousand MT)		
		Fresh	Processed	Total
Western ²	9,144	28.0	27.0	55.0
Midwest	8,258	12.6	21.5	34.1
Northeast	4,346	15.5	4.8	20.2
Southern	7,865	18.6	9.4	28.0
Eastern Canada/Mexico	571	1.2	0.0	1.2
Total	30,185	167	62.6	229.6

² Includes British Columbia, Canada

Table 2. World highbush blueberry production in 2005.

Region	Hectares	Production (thousand MT)		
		Fresh	Processed	Total
North America	30,185	75.9	62.6	138.5
USA	24,353	58.3	51.7	110.0
Canada	5,759	17.5	10.9	28.4
Mexico	73	0.1	0.0	0.1
Europe	4,285	18.9	0.7	19.6
Poland	1,600	5.5	0.0	5.5
Germany	1,600	7.8	0.2	8.0
The Netherlands	345	1.4	0.4	1.8
France	300	1.5	0.0	1.5
Spain/Portugal	240	1.7	0.0	1.7
Italy	180	1.0	0.0	1.0
United Kingdom	20	0.0	0.0	0.0
South America	7,300	14.5	1.5	15.9
Chile	4,500	11.5	1.1	12.7
Argentina	2,800	2.9	0.3	3.2
Oceania	985	2.5	0.8	3.3
Australia	560	2.0	0.4	2.4
New Zealand	425	0.5	0.4	0.9
Asia	710	0.5	0.8	1.3
Japan	450	0.5	0.8	1.3
China	260	0.0	0.0	0.0
South Africa	300	0.3	0.0	0.3
World total	43,765	112.5	66.4	179.0

With the expansion in worldwide blueberry area, plus the higher average yield through improvements in cultivars grown and production systems, we predict that worldwide production will increase faster in the next five years than at any other time in history. Growth will be particularly high in the southern hemisphere, but will come from all areas except perhaps Oceania.

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