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Small Fruits: Banking on Berries

Amy Daniel

In the world of small fruits, there are those who maintain their focus on the commercial fruit or agricultural segment and those who focus on the nursery segment—and ultimately the home gardener. It's unusual for a company to have their sights firmly on both. As the world's largest blueberry nursery stock provider to both agriculture and the nursery industry, Fall Creek Farm and Nursery, owned by the Brazelton family, lives squarely in both worlds.

Historically, the small fruits category has been one in which home garden varieties are often castoffs from the commercial produce genetics pool. Since the early 1990s, Fall Creek's breeding efforts, both through university partnerships and their own private breeding program, are developing blueberries and other small fruits specifically for the home gardener. Their program doesn't just focus on the fruit but on the ornamental quality and other attributes of the varieties, as well.

Small Fruit Trends

Amelie Aust, new products manager and a second-generation owner of Fall Creek, believes the nursery industry should pay careful attention to extensive research and trends in the commercial berry industry to see what's on the horizon. She summarizes some compelling findings:

> • Americans are striving to be healthier by incorporating healthy, fresh foods in their daily diets.
> • Fresh, frozen and processed blueberry consumption is still increasing at record levels.
> • The main reasons (in order of importance) consumers buy blueberries are 1) the enjoyable eating experience, 2) health benefits and 3) price.
> • Demographic data on blueberry consumers shows the same people who buy blueberry fruit buy blueberry plants.
> • Ground-breaking blueberry health research is now being done at the clinical level on cancer, Alzheimer's, diabetes, vision and other ailments, and will remain in the news for years to come.
> • The United States Highbush Blueberry Council (USHBC), funded by the farming industry, is spending $2 million a year on national consumer-direct blueberry promotions.

If these findings from the commercial fruit industry point to a foundational shift in mindset, how can the green industry build on that foundation? Amelie believes it will require value-added new genetics, premium-quality plants and strategic sales and marketing.



pictured: Fall Creek will introduce the world's first compact, thornless raspberry in 2012 as part of the BrazelBerries Collection.

The Brazeltons believe in this premise so much that they are making a major investment to launch their new BrazelBerries Collection of small fruits next spring. Amelie explains that the BrazelBerries Collection includes berry varieties that fulfill three promises: They must 1) be beautiful, ornamental plants, 2) be simple to grow and 3) have abundant, delicious fruit.

The limited, introductory launch in the spring of 2012 includes the world's first compact thornless raspberry that is perfectly suited to large patio containers. Also launching is a compact, ornamental blueberry with vivid, year-round seasonal color from peach to purple, with plans for adding new varieties to the collection each year.

"Nursery retailers are going to have to think differently about these ornamental edibles," says Amelie. "These are pattern interrupt varieties. They are gorgeous—and the fruit is a bonus. The BrazelBerries plants should be displayed in the ornamental shrub section of the retail nursery to really show their unique value."

The Sustainable and Edible Landscape

Two years ago, Monrovia introduced Bountiful Blue, an ornamental blueberry that was developed by Fall Creek and the University of Florida. This semi-evergreen, dense and compact blueberry has rich blue-green foliage and sky-blue fruit, and is ideal for the landscape or in a patio container as a fruiting shrub with ornamental qualities. Nicholas Staddon, Monrovia Growers' director of new plant introductions, said, "I knew instantly with Bountiful Blue that we had the opportunity to move a well-known edible, a blueberry, into the position of a superior ornamental shrub. This plant is going to facilitate change in our industry. It's going to cause us to rethink the way we look not only at blueberries, but possibly other groups of plants, as well."

Nicholas adds, "If we look at edibles as a trend, we're missing the boat. Edibles are part of something going on that is pretty special in our lifetime. Many folks call it sustainability. I call it responsibility. We are going through a cultural shift, and as an industry we are right in the thick of it. It might be the biggest opportunity we have ever had. All the talk is 'going green' from the kitchen table to the boardroom table. Edibles are a big part of 'going green.' We in the green industry must realize we need to position this group of plants as part of people's sustainable lifestyle—as a part of their wellness program."



pictured: Fall Creek's new products manager Amelie Aust evaluates fruit at a research station.

The ornamental edibles trend is fast gaining momentum. Suzi McCoy of the Garden Media Group was one of the first to identify this trend in 2008 and to publicly extol the benefits of edibles in the landscape versus only in the garden. She has subsequently predicted trends that people want plants that serve multiple purposes.

"Not only do people want to grow their own food," Suzi says, "they also want plants that will serve double-duty. Plants that provide beauty in their landscape environment and also help bring food to the family dining table make consumers feel their plant investments pay huge dividends and that they are being responsible with their land."

What's Ahead for Small Fruits

Fall Creek has a vision when it comes to the small fruits to be released through their BrazelBerries Collection. It's based on years of sharp focus in their breeding programs, what they have learned serving commercial fruit growers and on exhaustive consumer trends research. They're betting on their new plants playing a role in redefining how consumers incorporate berries into their healthy and sustainable lifestyles for years to come.

Research clearly illustrates consumers are striving for more healthful foods in their diets that are fun and convenient. And it's no secret to those in the green industry that home gardeners want plants that enhance their landscape and that are easy to grow. Finding success in home gardening and plants that deliver added value are the single biggest motivating factors that will keep home gardeners digging in the dirt. When consumers can buy easy-to-grow ornamental edibles that deliver two times the benefit for the investment—beauty and fruit production—they will make cash registers ring. **GP**

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