

As the U.S. leader in blackberry production, Oregon benefits from health message

Health studies and research put blackberries in the pink

July 18, 2007... It sounds impressive and it is. Blackberries are the number one antioxidant food per serving of 1,130 grocery store products tested as part of a collaborative scientific study. Meanwhile, a second study identifies an extract derived from fresh blackberries that reduces cancerous tumors and prevents the spread of cancer cells in animal models. Combined, the two studies puts some emphasis on health claims made by the blackberry industry. That is important to Oregon, the nation's leading producer of commercially-grown blackberries.

"Everyone has known for years that eating berries is good for you," says Kris Anderson, manager of the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Commodity Commissions Program. "With the latest research on blackberries, we know even more about how much and why those berries are good for you."

The health message is being aggressively pushed by the Oregon Raspberry and Blackberry Commission (ORBC), which is using assessments from growers and processors to promote the industry and contribute to blackberry research. With the perfect climate and ideal soils, Oregon grows nearly all of the nation's commercial blackberries— including the renowned Marionberry, the premium of all blackberries— and the industry has a production value of more than \$35 million. So anything that helps create consumer demand for blackberries will help Oregon's agricultural economy.

Consumer and production trends show the blackberry industry in a growth mode. Those in the business say it has to do with people changing their diet to include more healthy foods.

"Aging baby boomers are more concerned about health and they want to live longer," says Dave Dunn, manager of Willamette Valley Fruit Company of Salem, and ORBC. "They're staring cancer and other health issues in the face, so they are changing their diets and habits. Blackberries are really good for the digestive system, aging properties, and more. Plus, they taste good."

This is not a case of berry wars with blackberries claiming to be better than their cousins. But the recent study by U.S. and Norwegian scientists on the antioxidant value of various foods certainly gives blackberries a boost. Antioxidants neutralize the effects of free radicals— those unstable compound molecules that can attack human cells and damage DNA. In the study, several berries grown in Oregon crack the top ten including strawberries, cranberries, raspberries, and blueberries. But none match the antioxidant content of blackberries. The industry is also touting the fact that consumers don't need to eat a lot of blackberries to get the antioxidant benefit— a half cup a day of fresh or frozen will do.

Findings from the second study are concise and clear: Cyanidin-3-glucoside (C3G) is a natural product derived from blackberries, and it exhibits chemopreventive and chemotherapeutic activity.

---more---

"C3G has extremely high cancer fighting potential," says Cat McKenzie, marketing and promotions coordinator for ORBC. "It not only stops existing tumors from growing, it shrinks them and stops them from spreading to other parts of the body. The researchers studied lung and skin cancer with good results. They were so impressed that they took out a patent for the C3G extraction process."

Commercial production of the blackberry extract is a ways off and more studies need to be conducted, but there is a great deal of potential and excitement regarding the natural health benefits of blackberries. While the message is being marketed to consumers, there is a corresponding message to Oregon growers.

"There is a sense of pride in the fact that the growers are farming and producing something that has value for people's lives, not just that they are putting something out on the table," says Dunn. "Blackberries are healthy and good, and they are fun to eat."

Those health benefits are not confined to fresh berries. A tablespoon of grandma's homemade blackberry jam can also be a source of goodness. No one is suggesting a steady diet of high-sugar foods like jam or preserves, but the fact is processing does not radically affect the health components of blackberries. Dunn says, in some ways, there are actually nutritional advantages to processed berries.

"On the fresh side, because of shelf life considerations, you have to pick the berry before it is ripe, and before all the flavor and nutritional value has reached its peak," says Dunn. "In many cases, the processed berry is picked by machine and it won't be released from the bush until it is fully ripe. That type of fruit will not hold up in the fresh market. The processed market most often has berries with all the health components locked in."

The blackberry health message transcends all markets. Local consumers have the added benefit of a fresh, sustainable product. But the export market is interested in a healthy food no matter where it comes from. Oregon's top agricultural export customer— Japan— has been ahead of the curve in marketing healthy, nutritional food products. The health theme has played well for blueberry exports to Japan, Although blackberries and their caneberry relatives have not yet caught on overseas, efforts by the industry and ODA in recent years have raised awareness in Japan and there is an opportunity to continue the discussion.

Meanwhile, the domestic marketing of blackberries has been bolstered by the latest health news. The market for frozen blackberries sold in poly bags is showing increases of up to 12 percent.

"Consumers, who are buying poly bag berries as either berry blends or individual berries, are more health conscious, using the berries in smoothies and other applications," says Gery Amos, marketing director of RainSweet Inc.— a cooperative of Oregon berry growers. "We are beginning to see blackberries available in all major grocery markets year round, both fresh and frozen, as a result of consumer awareness of health benefits."

As Oregon blackberries continue to be harvested this month, the industry will continue its campaign of public awareness, confident that an informed consumer will choose to be a big berry eater.

For more information, contact Cat McKenzie at (800) 859-0355 or (541) 456-2264.