

# THE APPETIZER

Food & Drink start here

Blueberry fields forever: Prince Edward Island more  
than potatoes and seafood

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*[Photos from top: P.E.I.'s wild blueberry bushes in flower; a field of wild blueberry bushes; wooden "hives" that house domestic bees — the bees are released in the fields to pollinate the bushes for berry-making; Chris Jordan, berry development officer, for the province's agriculture ministry, takes stock of the fields. Credit: Handout]*

Potatoes, lobster, the best calamari going — Prince Edward Island has some great eating, but the island province also is making a name for its growing bounty of wild blueberries.

Those tiny jet-blue gems are much smaller and sweeter than their larger, cultivated cousins, and are more nutrient-dense, so they're [better for your health, researchers say](#). The wild blueberries have developed their own defences to the elements, such as UV rays and insects, making them more potent with disease-fighting antioxidants.

Why P.E.I.? The fields are relatively level and rock-free which makes crop production much easier, says Chris Jordan, berry development officer for the province's agriculture ministry. In the late 1990s, P.E.I. began a program to promote wild blueberry growing because of increasing demand for the berries and a good fit for the land.

"We've got the sandy soil and winters with lots of snow which prevents injury to the plants during the winter," he says. Stems are exposed during the winter so all that snow acts as insulation for the plant.

Wild blueberries are not planted, the wild stands of native plants are "managed" by growers, who can often achieve yields of 3,000 pounds per acre or more. There are about 125 growers managing 13,000 acres in P.E.I.; 10,000 are in production with a bi-annual cycle, so about 5,000 acres are harvested. That's a lot of berries. You'll still find plenty across Canada and in the eastern states.

To help the process along, honey bees are brought right to the fields for pollination. Beekeepers bring the wooden boxes housing the hives and park them in the fields for a week.

Yes, there's much to learn about wild blueberries from the island, Jordan says. He monitors the fields, checks in with the growers and acts as a resource. Only a small portion of the growers are traditional farmers of other crops, so there will still be lots of those lovely P.E.I. potatoes.

The first step in developing a blueberry field is identifying land where wild blueberries are already established. Often the best blueberry fields come from old farmland which has been left alone for 30 years.

The berries are sold in Asia, Europe and across North America and used in products including breakfast cereals, wines, jams, yogurts and muffins. Only about 5% of the fruit is sold as fresh product.

So, there's a lot to ponder when you fork into that piece of pie this summer.

—*Karen Hawthorne, National Post*