BEACH PLUM PRODUCTION AND MARKETING

Richard Uva, Postdoctoral Associate and Thomas Whitlow, Associate Professor, Department of Horticulture, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

The New York Berry News

Beach plum (*Prunus maritima* Marsh.) is a shrub native to the Atlantic coast with most populations occurring in sand dunes from southern Maine through Maryland. The fruit is a small plum (purple-blue and rarely yellow) with a flavor that varies from astringent to relatively sweet when ripe. The tart fruits gives jam and jelly a distinctive and sought after flavor. The tradition of beach plum collection and processing persists today as a small but thriving cottage industry in coastal communities, with hotspots on Cape Cod, Eastern Long Island and the Jersey Shore's Island Beach State Park. Fruit of this native plum is being wild-collected to make preserves and jellies that are sold to summer tourists and the gourmet preserve niche market. Uncooked plums are only rarely eaten.

With funding from Northeast SARE (http://www.sare.org/), Cornell Horticulturists together with Massachusetts Cooperative Extension and several growers from around the Northeast have lead a program to develop cultivation methods for beach plum. Successful orchards have been established and approximately 40 farms are experimenting with beach plum in the Eastern U.S. The typical participants are small farms, many of which produce berries, fruits and vegetables. At this point, less than 10 growers have plantings of 1/2 to 1 acre in size, others are growing fewer plants on a trial basis. Most orchards have been established in the last 3 years and many will bear their first crop in 2005.

Research Results-At Cornell, we have evaluated the effects of irrigation, mulch, and fertilizer on the growth and yield of beach plum at a test orchard on sandy soil. Growth and yield were significantly greater in fertilized than in unfertilized treatments, while irrigation and mulch had no effect. The most serious problem for fruit production was brown rot fungi (*Monilinia* sp.) for which controls are available. We have found that beach plum has similar cultural requirements and pests as other commercially grown plums. However, beach plum's flowers are not borne on spurs, but on new wood as with peach. While beach plum can be grown well inland, it is important that it is planted on well-drained soil.

Expanding Markets - In September of 2003 we conducted a series of interviews with 6 gourmet chefs in the New York City area. Each chef was given 5 pounds of beach plum fruit to experiment with and to share their results with us. The chefs were excited about beach plum in general. One chef requested to purchase additional fruit from us and added a beach plum sauce to his restaurant menu for the holiday season. Another chef plans to put on a beach plum dinner in late winter of this year, where every course contains beach plum in some part of the recipe. This upscale restaurant market is always looking for something innovative and could possibly be a lucrative outlet for beach plum and other specialty fruits.

Horticulturally speaking, beach plum is in an interesting position. While still primarily a wild collected fruit, it is on the verge of becoming a cultivated crop. The fruit is in high demand by a limited audience and cannot be purchased through regular distribution channels. There are opportunities for those interested in growing beach plum who are willing to pursue niche marketing and for those doing value added preserves. Additionally, because growers are currently using plants grown from wild-collected seed, there is great opportunity for crop improvement. Superior types could be easily selected from wild stock. At Cornell Orchards, and several other orchards across the northeast, we are evaluating beach plums grown from a range-wide seed collection. We plan on screening the plantings for disease resistance, fruit quality, yield and antioxidant content.

For more information on the project, our website (http://www.beachplum.cornell.edu/) includes photos, management information, goals of the project, contact information, news and research updates.

(Reprinted from: New York Berry News, Vol. 3 No. 10, October 19, 2004.)