

Blue Honeysuckle Update 2004

by Dr. Bob Bors

Blue Honeysuckles are very well adapted to growing conditions at northern latitudes, having been developed on Siberia and Russia. They grow and yield much better here in Saskatoon than they do in Oregon. Their plant phenology in Saskatoon suggests that they could do as well or possibly better at sites further north. Blue Honeysuckle is an exciting fruit crop, new to this area of the world. We are gaining experience with it, identifying and developing the very best cultivars, and encouraging propagators to provide large numbers of plants at reasonable prices. It won't be long before significant economic activity is being generated by Blue Honeysuckle.

Here's why I like blue Honeysuckles:

1. Early harvest season is 2 weeks before strawberries
2. Flowers can take -7C without damage
3. Seeds are similar to Kiwi fruit seeds. You don't have to remove them and you don't notice them
4. They are easily detached and undoubtedly can be mechanically harvested. In fact they are the easiest to detach of any fruit I've encountered.
5. Flavour is sweet/sour with a hint of black current. Some people imagine them to taste like a blueberry but I don't think so.

In 1997, we planted 4 varieties of blue honeysuckle: Blue Belle, Blue Bird, Blue Velvet, and Berry Blue. Blue Belle was the best tasting and most productive with Berry Blue having the best tree shape and not as sweet but still good. Blue Bird was bland in comparison while Blue Velvet bloomed too late to be cross pollinated and had negligible yield. You must have 2 different varieties for cross pollination so we recommend Blue Belle, and Berry Blue. One Green Earth Nursery in Oregon and DNA Gardens in Alberta have these. I'm told that Blue Belle is harder to propagate so there is a shorter supply of this one.

In 2002 we obtained 15 cultivars from the Vavilov Institute in Russia (a government genebank mainly open to researchers), and 20 seedling lines from the USDA genebank.

These have just been field planted, so please don't ask for any yet. It will be a couple of years until they are tested. We will grow stock plants of all so that later the best can be released quickly. I will also need to check into any plant breeders rights that may apply to these varieties.

In 2003, we received an additional 10 varieties for testing purposes.

Fortunately, Blue Honeysuckles often bear fruit one year after planting so it may be possible to quickly pick out the best quality varieties.

Russia is the origin of the superior Blue Honeysuckles. They began breeding improved varieties in 1950. If you have tried the Canadian "Sweetberry Honeysuckles" please realize that those old varieties are garbage compared to new varieties. Those old varieties have a bitterness that the Russians have bred out.

It may be possible with the right connections to import cultivars directly from Russia. I've heard of at least one instance of this. If you have the connections you will need to get an import permit from the federal government.