

Haskap is a Wetland Plant

(*Lonicera caerulea* or Blue Honeysuckle)

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Where to grow Haskap

In my files I have a 2 inch stack of scientific papers on Haskap, mostly from Russia and Japan, with a few papers from the US and Europe. Most of these papers deal with botanical descriptions, variety descriptions, fruit quality, or cold hardiness but are quite lacking in information about how to grow them. I was therefore quite shocked (and excited) to find a Saskatchewan reference about them in Heinjo Lahrings' book "Water and Wetland Plants of the Prairie Provinces" (page 168). This was the first reference about them that I have found that described their natural habitat and where to find them in the wild in Canada! According to Heinjo Lahrings, *Lonicera caerulea* can be found in "swamps, bogs and wet drainages in the Rocky Mountains and Boreal Forest" and its range includes northern portions of the prairie provinces! This adaptation to wetlands explains why the Haskap are doing so well at the Prairie Ursuline Centre at Bruno, SK. We had planted them at the base of a hill, which earlier this year was completely swamped for almost a month. An e-mail conversation with Maxine Thompson revealed that in Japan, Haskap were naturally found near rivers. In her last visit to the Haskap growing region, she had noted that trees were out-competing the Haskap in many areas. She speculated that as the region grew in population, those low lying areas were drained and that this made conditions favourable for trees to colonize the area.

What does this mean? To me, it means that those 3 plots of land at the Hort field plots that often have standing water in springtime, are all going to be planted with Haskap. Having heavy clay and being wet in spring, those plots have often been the last places to be seeded. What has been the least desired portion of the Hort Field Land will now become prime real estate!

Low lying, wet areas have common characteristics. They usually have high organic matter because excess water slows the decay of dead plant material. They are poorly drained for a reason; most commonly they have heavy clay soils or an underlying hardpan layer or bedrock. They often have lower pH than surrounding areas. Some wetlands have high salinity levels. Plants grown in



wetlands often have a fibrous root system that grows close to the surface. Therefore it may not be wise to do deep cultivation near Haskap plants. It may also be that Haskap will not be easily planted in spring, and that fall planting could be better. Low lying areas are also subject to late frosts because cold air drains to those areas. Fortunately, Haskap has evolved to withstand -7°C to open flowers, so this shouldn't be too much of a problem. Low lying areas could also be a place where herbicides accumulate from runoff. So you may need to consider small scale testing of such areas.

It is quite fortunate that the Alberta Profession Horticultural Growers Congress and Foundation Society has approved a grant for me to investigate pH, salinity, and watering with Haskap under controlled greenhouse conditions. This study will be completed in the 2006 season.

Just because Haskap is found in wet conditions in the wild does not mean those are its preferred conditions. Obviously, Haskap is not an underwater plant, so too much water can be bad. It will be important to discover the optimum conditions for Haskap. It will also be important to discover an 'economic threshold' for growing Haskap in wet areas. If you have some wet areas on your acreage, try growing some Haskap in the middle of it, but also try the edges and further away where it is dryer. Let me know what happens!

In 2005 we identified perhaps a dozen superior selections from our breeding program. In 2006 we will find out which of these selections have compatible pollen and do further tests for fruit quality. It may be a few years before we know which selections are most productive and better understand optimum conditions. However, I anticipate that we will begin propagating these better selections as soon as possible. Overall, I find our collection of Haskap to be very hardy, reasonably productive, and worth planting.