Chokeberries Become New “Superfood”

It’s possible that one of the hottest new health foods is already growing on your property, especially if you live along the East Coast. Aronia, which is better known as black chokeberry is now considered a “superfood.” If you aren’t among the few lucky enough to have it growing wild, you can buy seedlings to grow for your own use - or commercially to meet the growing market demand.

“The antioxidant percentage is so much higher than acai berries, blueberries and goji berries. It’s just being rediscovered in North America,” says Bob Pertzborn, a board member of the Midwest Aronia Association who grows 1,200 aronia shrubs on his Ankeny, Iowa, property. He points out that Native Americans and pioneers ate the berries, which also protected their skin from sun damage.

The aronia association was organized in 2008, after Iowa State University Extension research provided production information, and producers recognized aronia as a value-added crop.

“The berryies are out of Europe because they are better performing than native varieties,” Pertzborn says. Commercial growers plant varieties including Viking, Galicjanka, McKenzie and Nero.

The 4 to 12-in. plugs are planted with a tree planter 2 1/2 to 5 ft. apart in rows 14 to 15 ft. apart. Growers often install electric fence if deer are a problem because they like to pull up small trees. Rabbits also like to nibble on the young trees, but that only means the roots are more developed and the few trees recover, Pertzborn says. Birds don’t like the berries so they don’t present a problem.

“People like that aronia berries are not overly sweet and are healthy,” Gorseth adds, noting she is eager to harvest her own berries next year to develop salsa and vinaigrette recipes.

“Aaron Op Dahl harvested a ton of berries off 300 shrubs in one year and makes wine. He hosted the North Dakota meeting because he’s excited about the health benefits and opportunities, though he’s never considered himself a big health nut. "I was putting in a windbreak and aronia were on the list. Now we are hooked big time," he says. The shrubs are hardy in North Dakota’s harsh winters and haven’t had any pest issues. Soil makes a difference in yield. A few of his 5-year-old trees yielded more than 40 lbs. each, but most average about 6 lbs. per shrub in the sandy loam soil he says, so far he harvests by hand, but notes a harvester (about $50,000) would be a reasonable investment if markets stay at $3 to $4/lb.

For people interested in learning more, the 5th Annual Midwest Aronia Conference will be held in Moline, Ill., March 19-21. Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Midwest Aronia Association, 61817 650th St., Atlantic, Iowa 50022 (ph 515 778-4262; info@midwestaronia.org; www.midwestaronia.org).

Chokeberries have deep purple berries with a soft seed and are somewhat tart. Many producers use organic growing practices and sell the berries wholesale.

Business is thriving for Nebraskan Scott Holtgrew, who assembles and installs new center pivot irrigation systems.

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