


As the blueberry season winds down in the Pacific Northwest, the U.S. is looking at possible record volume for the berry. A favorable climate and maturing plantations have meant a bumper crop and rising expectations. 

Fall Creek Farm & Nursery president Dave Brazelton explained that although high volume has created price pressure, extended consumer possibilities are around the corner.

"This was an exceptionally high year when all areas were hitting. In my memory from being in this industry, I can't remember when every area had a record or near record crop and I've been in this for a lot of years," Brazelton said.

"With that being said, I expect that we'll reach new levels and be looking at a lot more blueberries than we had in the past."

In Fall Creek's home state, Oregon, Brazelton said the area is coming out of a heavy volume month and entering into late varieties like Aurora and Elliot. Early heat units pushed the season ahead by about 10 days, creating increased overlap with other production regions.

"It has been a record crop so far this season. As well as weather that concentrated the crop, there has also been a good deal of overlap in the fresh market. Washington, particularly east Washington, came in at about the same time that Oregon came on," Brazelton said.

"British Columbia and Michigan followed very shortly thereafter. And New Jersey wasn't completely finished. So in July, we've had nationally some record volumes of fresh move through the system and it's still moving through now."

Brazelton described this peak period as a possible game changer that could improve access and options for blueberries.

"If I look at the last 10 years, we've had years where there has been a lot of tension between fresh and processed. If fresh prices were high, processed didn't get the fruit it needed.

"If processed prices were high, fresh was affected. It was at the expense of one or the other. I think we're entering a period where there's going to be plenty in both markets during the high times of the season.

"For the last 10 years, in some years, consumer demand really exceeded supply and that's where we got that tension where prices got exceptionally high or we didn't have enough fruit for a specific market. That is really changing. Even though we may not have a record every year like this one, there's going to be enough fruit for both the processed and fresh

market."

In the short term however, high volume has come with its drawbacks, including price volatility.

"I think in the beginning, we're certainly seeing a downward effect on pricing. Any time you have big jumps in production and availability, you have a downward effect.

"As difficult as it is, it's also the way you reach new consumption levels, having berries in ample supply in fresh and sellers willing to promote them. As well as in processed, when you have volumes at reasonable prices, it encourages new uses," he said.

"I think a year from now, we'll see record numbers of new blueberry products being introduced because food manufacturers can be assured of supply. I think that's the paradigm change."

### **Counterseasonal challenges**

Although most North America blueberry volume is expected to stay domestic, some new opportunities may include greater exports.

"Certainly with the growth in volume here, especially on the West Coast, I suspect we're going to see a lot more trade with the Pacific Rim and throughout Asia. There's a tremendous amount of trade that goes west and it's historical. Whether its wheat from Oregon or blueberries, Oregon is an exporting state. We're going to see a lot more now that the volumes are increasing," Brazelton said.

Brazelton cited Europe and China as two major, up-and-coming markets. For counter-seasonal supply, in particular, Brazelton described major opportunities for suppliers ready to offer reliable, exportable supply.

"One thing to remember is that Europe has no 'Mexico' that works. There's Morocco but that's not true counter-seasonal supply. And Africa isn't situated in the same way geographically or climatically," he said.

"Europe will be projected as one of the main growth areas for consumption for blueberries in the world. So where will they get their counter-seasonal supply? They will have to get it from South America."

These growing markets could mean a shift in focus for countries like Chile, Argentina, Peru

and Mexico. For Chile, in particular, appropriate preparation could mean major returns.

"The market that's virtually untouched for blueberries is the counter-seasonal Chinese market. Chile is the only blueberry producing country outside of Thailand with open access to China right now and that is a huge competitive advantage," he said.

"I believe China will be the largest blueberry consumer within five years. However, it goes back to one limiting factor. Most varieties available in Chile aren't suitable for that long trip."

Overall, however, Brazelton said Chile will continue to have the advantage of good land, technology, logistics and a grower base.

"They are the best place in the world for all of that. What they also have are a lot of varieties not suited for that trip [to China]," he said.

"If Chile replaces its varieties and improves its arrivals, its market opportunities are really the world."

For the U.S. market, the major counter-seasonal players will continue to be Chile and Argentina, he said. Over time, however, newer, younger plantations from Mexico may create extra competition.

"Mexico has some real competitive advantages going to the U.S. But this isn't going to happen overnight. Argentina and Chile are reliable, organized suppliers every week from early October and through the end of April into North America. That market isn't going to go away and Mexico isn't going to just step in and figure it out," he said.

One market certainty is that North American consumer demand is moving on up and should remain high.

"I think blueberry consumption will continue to grow in the U.S. and Canada. We don't see any signs that it's letting up at all. Everything we've seen so far indicates that it's increasing at a healthy pace," he said.

Related story: [Fall Creek releases six new blueberry varieties](#)

[www.freshfruitportal.com](http://www.freshfruitportal.com)