

Springtime Thoughts from a Blueberry Farmer

At Red Canoe Farms, in Hauser, Idaho, spring's alarm clock rings with the first trickles of melted snow. March winds buffet the mountains with teenage energy that will mellow by July. Moist air billows over the Cascades, tumble-weeding through Spokane and the Rathdrum prairie and showering cold spitty weather on the valley floor, leaving glossy roads and wet dogs.

When soil temperatures reach 46 degrees, the genus *Vaccinium corymbosum*, the high-bush blueberry, awakes. Since November, the various members of the plant have acted like a sleeping household. Roots rouse from dormancy first, much as parents do. Shoots and canes sleep in for a couple weeks before seeking nourishment, like children hungry for breakfast. At spring temperatures, water molecules, with their positive and negative charge, begin to separate nutrients into ion states and carry them into and up the blueberry plant as easy as a person could swallow coffee and oatmeal. Vegetative buds enlarge and leaves unfurl, clothing canes in the most primordial and popular color: green.

We grow eight varieties of blueberries on our U-Pick farm, and spring signals the beginning of another working season. We planted three acres of two-year-old bushes one year ago, so we are not in production until 2012. Yet even this year, blueberries will require much labor: pruning, watching for gopher damage, applying fertilizer, spreading mulch and weeding. Last summer we had problems with weeds. Weeds arrived in three distinct waves. In May, morning glory vines snaked toward the base of each blueberry plant, and then crawled up the canes and out the laterals, as if the noble blueberry was merely a trellis. Their vines had to be unknotted, detwisted and unwound. Thistles, fine grasses, pigweed and milkweed grew in the July wave. The August wave included course

grasses and dandelions. Dandelion was the most difficult weed to eliminate, since root fibers left in the ground would phoenix into a new dandelion. We dumped them all at the transfer station down the road. The weigh station attendant said it was 5300 pounds. With any luck, I will not have to pull so many weeds this year.

For now, though, it is still spring, and we are not working too much. Remnants of snow still hide in shadows. The ground remains brown and muddy. Blueberry canes still wear their red winter coat, worn and wind burnt. Record November snows have flattened the alfalfa fields, colored weak yellow with illusive green flecks. Muddy trenches crisscross the west parcel where our son has repeatedly driven his pickup between a shooting platform and a target—all to fine-tune his new riflescope down to a one-inch grouping of bullet holes from 200 yards out.

Other signs of spring are leafing out as well: a cold snap and four inches of powder blanket the field just a week after I start pruning, and only a few logs remain in the woodpile. Taxes are due soon. I don't want to hire an accountant. Instead, I read *IRS Publication 225*, "A Farmer's Guide to Taxes," and mull concepts I have never churned over before: *Basis, capitalization, depreciation, deduction, Schedule F*. I reason that once we know how to do farm taxes, we may very well be accountants.

I remember reading Shakespeare's plays in college. In some, springtime conflict was usually not between two rival lovers but rather between the young and the old, like an ardent lover in the flower of life who argued with an aging parent clinging to overlooked values; or infatuated lovers who battle an archaic, senseless law. I recognize this same struggle out in the blueberry field. Spring is a time when winter tries to hold

back the summer. Nevertheless, here is the end: Sweetness and vulnerability will emerge victorious from the fruitless safety of winter hardening.

I know that around this planet desperate citizens battle dictators, military alliances release missiles to weaken enemy forces, tsunamis wreak devastation on homes and hope. Jobs teeter on fragile economies. News story audiences feed like sharks on the disappointments of their neighbors. Still, white blossoms will soon reach into a blue sky. Crisp leaves will jockey for the best sunlight. Then, beautiful blueberries (some larger than a quarter) will swell and ripen and fill kitchens with joy. This is something positive we can depend on: the annual renewal and provision of the Earth.

One early spring when I was in high school, my dad, brother, and I canoed for two days through the twisting, cattail-lined labyrinth of Winchester Wasteway near Ephrata. Although night temperatures had been dipping to the teens, Dad rigged two tarps instead of a tent to protect us from rain. It didn't rain; it just froze. We shivered all night. In the early morning, as Dad poured water into a coffee can for cocoa, an icy stalagmite rose from the bottom—at least, that is how I remember it.

It was too cold for this adventure, but my brother and I had been bored with our bedrooms and tired of homework and standing by the fireplace. The neighbors were already assembling their new briquette grill. The track team—in the school's new red and yellow sweats—had started its training runs around town. Matted grass in the backyard just needed some fertilizer. We went canoeing. The world looked ready to pop.

Blueberries must feel like that now. They have had their required 1000 hours of rest. It is time to get up. The sun is shining more often. Even the wet days are warmer. Summer is already making promises.