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Berry Growing for Urban and Suburban Farmers

Introduction

The following information is based on my own experiences operating a small suburban berry farm and nursery. I encourage readers to use this information as a guide to help them explore this aspect of farming and to come to their own conclusions regarding growing practices and types of plants that suit their situation.

My farm

Over the last ten years I've worked to create a thriving farm/nursery in my backyard. My suburban home and lot of $\frac{2}{3}$ acre looks like any other suburban residence from the street, with trees, shrubs and grass. My total growing area of about $\frac{1}{3}$ acre is in my fence-enclosed back yard. In this space I have rows of berry plants and nursery stock that I propagate myself.

On average, I devote anywhere from 10-40 hours a week to the farm, depending on the time of year. I'm able to work about 10 months of the year.

Though I've been farming for almost ten years I still feel strange sometimes referring to my business as a farm. My internal picture of a farm with a silo, farm animals and acres of cultivated fields must be embedded pretty strongly. However, this picture can and should change. Small landowners can effectively and positively contribute to the food stream while earning a decent per acre return on their work and contributing to the well-being of their towns and neighborhoods.

Before You Start

Every great undertaking needs a bit of planning and reflection. Take some time to start off on the right foot.

1. Check with your local municipality. Some places may be more open to your activity than others. It helps to be a good neighbor - no chemical spraying, noisy animals or power equipment at the break of dawn.

2. Make sure you have time for farming. I worked for years as a school librarian which gave me free time in late afternoons, summer and spring vacation. A demanding corporate job may be biting off more than you can chew.
3. It may seem unnecessary, but get legit. Unless you want to stay very informal, register as a business, get farm insurance and learn something about keeping records.
4. Feel out the markets. Talk to some local high-end chefs about their interest in berries or stop by the local produce market to see if they want to carry the berries you are thinking of growing. Every location has different market conditions.

Some things to keep in mind

Irrigation - How will you get water to your plants?

Access - Since my growing area is in my backyard, I can't pull up a truck to load or unload plants, manure, or other things. I generally use a wheelbarrow. Is this ok for you?

Availability of soil amendments - Over the years I've added tons of organic matter to my soil such as manure, leaves and compost. Do you have a nearby source for such things?

Sunlight - Suburban and urban areas can be short on sunlight. Do you have enough sun exposure to grow plants?

Soil and drainage - How is your soil and how is the drainage. Soil and drainage can be improved in a number of ways. Are you willing to make this effort?

Over the years I've accumulated a number of things to help me in my business. Though they are specific to my business, they have general use in most suburban farms.

Truck - After about a year I figured out that using the family car for my farm wasn't going to work out. I purchased a small Toyota Tacoma which I use to bring in manure, wood chips, compost or leaves to amend my soil. I also use it to haul plants or other large items. I don't know what I would do without it.

Refrigerator and chest freezer - I actually have two chest freezers and every year I fill them. I use an old refrigerator to store berries after they are harvested if I am not delivering them immediately. I also store cuttings in the winter. The chest freezer is used for the berries I sell frozen such as elderberry and aronia, but also sometimes red currant and raspberry.

By freezing the berries I am more flexible about when I sell them. I don't need to worry about fragile berries becoming unsaleable and if I only pick a small amount of a

particular berry (say 2-3 lbs of raspberries) I can accumulate enough over time to make a decent sale.

Good hand tools - I don't use any power tools but I do make use of the standard hand tools such as a steel rake, hoe and shovel and several different types of pruners. Though I don't buy the top of the line tools, I've learned that "you get what you pay for" and cheap tools don't last.

How big - what can you handle

A suburban farm is based on a specific household and one or more family members. In my case I'm the sole worker at my farm. My wife is always available for emergencies, but she has her own demanding job. That means I need to plan for a workload appropriate for one person.

This season I watched my aronia plants as they flowered, set berries and the berries grew and began to ripen. I could tell it was going to be a large harvest. Of course this was good because I would have more berries to sell. The downside - I have to pick all the berries. It turned out to be close to 500 lbs of aronia berries from about 40 producing plants. At the same time my elderberry harvest was winding down and my raspberry harvest was just beginning. For awhile I was doing a lot of picking and preparing berries for sale.

I don't think I would have been able to handle a substantially larger harvest along with all the other things that needed to get done with my plants and other harvests.

Generally I have my harvests arranged in succession, beginning with haskaps and ending with late raspberries. This allows me to "digest" each harvest and still get work done around the farm.

Generally, by the end of all my harvests I need the rest of the fall and early winter to get the farm ready again for the spring.

Why berries - Advantages/disadvantages

In my previous farming life I grew a variety of things. I sold heirloom tomatoes, basil, squash blossoms, pea shoots - anything that seemed to be in demand and suited to my conditions. Eventually I began to make a transition to berries and the more I explored the world of berries, the more I began to understand how limited most Americans are in their knowledge and experience of these healthy and tasty foods. Many of the berries I grow are unavailable to consumers, even in high end supermarkets.

There are of course other crops that offer a very good return on your time and effort. I feel berries have a number of advantages for the suburban farmer.

1. In a situation of limited land, berries offer a high value crop with high demand
2. Customers don't always need a large amount of berries. A restaurant may be completely satisfied to buy 5 lbs of a hard-to-find berry for a "special". Likewise, an individual will usually buy only a few pounds of berries to either eat at home or prepare something specific.
3. In a suburban farm with close proximity to markets, short shelf life is your friend. It means that berries coming from far away are usually inferior to what you can offer your customers.
4. Most berries can be frozen, which allows much more flexibility in sales. Though this may mean a slight decrease in price for some berries it also allows them to be sold off-season when there is less competition.
5. Berries have multiple markets, which increases the sales potential. For example, elderberry can be sold as a medicinal or as a culinary item.
6. The market is wide open for many less common berries. For example, when did you last see gooseberries at your local ShopRite?

Since nothing is all good or bad, it seems only fair to highlight some of the disadvantages of berries.

1. Berries are perennials, which means once you plant them, they are not going anywhere. This might cause problems if you are growing on someone else's land and things don't work out.
2. Most berries take a few years to reach full production. This means that in the beginning you will have limited sales, unless you fill in with a crop that fruits the first year such as goldenberries or everbearing strawberries.
3. Harvesting berries can be very time consuming.

Some berries to consider

Gooseberry	Red Currant	Jostaberry
Aronia	Seaberry	Saskatoon (serviceberry)
Strawberry (everbearing)	White Currant	Goldenberry (cape gooseberry)
Mulberry	Elderberry	Haskap (honeyberry)
Strawberry (alpine)	Goumi	Raspberry

Selling your berries

It doesn't do you much good growing all kinds of great berries if you can't sell them, and that means you need to inform people. The truth is I don't do a lot of social media because I tend to sell out of my harvests in a very short time.

When I do need to push a particular berry, I usually prefer identifying specific potential customers and contacting them.

“Cold Calls” - Businesses are out there that want your produce, you just have to let them know you exist. I periodically send out emails to restaurants and food businesses that I think would be interested in my berries. In this email I introduce myself and what I can offer. Whenever possible I try to send to a specific person, but sometimes this isn't possible. Sometimes I get an answer asking for additional information or expressing interest in a specific berry. Sometimes the email disappears into a black hole. I generally follow up with a telephone call to the business. This allows me to make personal contact and also reference the previous email.

When contacting the chef at a restaurant be mindful that chefs are very busy people. Generally a good time to get them is mid-morning (if they are in) or the quiet time in the mid-afternoon between lunch and dinner.

A variation on the cold call is the “cold visit”. This has been effective for me in the past when I was targeting a number of restaurants in a particular town that were within walking distance of each other. Bring along some samples of your berries and just walk into the restaurant and ask to speak to the chef. Nothing catches the attention of a chef like seeing quality produce that he or she can't easily get from other sources. Be ready to give prices and approximate availability and of course give them your business card if you have some available.

Markets

Though berries are in high demand, you still need to understand who your potential customers might be. Consider the following markets for your berries.

1. **Restaurants.** I've found that higher end restaurants are most receptive to my berries. These are places where the chef has a lot of decision making power. These chefs usually love less common berries that they may not be able to source locally.
2. **Produce Stories.** Produce stores should be interested in expanding their offerings of local berries, which are very popular these days.

3. **Individuals.** Never underestimate the power of the “old country”. Depending on your location, you may find a local population that will eagerly purchase your berries.
4. **Herbalists.** Herbalists will make value added products from your berries.
5. **Beverage Businesses.** Breweries, cideries and wineries all use berries

Elderberry example

Though elderberry grows wild in many parts of the United States, named cultivars are generally more productive and have larger berries. The two types of elderberry grown commercially are *Sambucus canadensis* (American elderberry) and *Sambucus nigra* (European elderberry). There are several important differences between them.

First of all, European cultivars usually have very fragrant flowers. Fragrant elderflowers have a very good market. Customers will include upscale bars and restaurants (think St. Germain liqueur), breweries and other beverage businesses, individuals and other food businesses, for example to flavor ice cream. You can expect 5-8 lbs or more from a three year old plant. I sell elderflower for \$18/lb. Of course, by harvesting flowers you will get be able to also harvest berries. However, you will also be able to eliminate any potential loss from birds or other visitors to your plants.

European cultivars are also somewhat less cold hardy than American cultivars. They are larger plants and they also do not fruit on current years growth. Lastly, I have found them to be less vigorous than American varieties.

Regarding American elderberry, there are many cultivars on the market. Most, if not all, are selections from plants found growing wild. The last few years have seen an increase in the number of cultivars coming from the midwest - a large elderberry growing area. Most cultivars had originally been from the northeastern United States and Canada.

Trial a number of cultivars to see which do best for you.

I have found that the American elderberry produces a better crop of berries. Expect 8-10 lbs per plant at a price of \$8-\$12. Customers for elderberry includes beverage and other food businesses, herbalists, restaurants and individuals. Elderflowers from American varieties can also be used for herbal tea, which has medicinal qualities. Berries are also made into a syrup used in treating symptoms of colds and flu.