



NEW JERSEY DINING | FROM THE FARM

Organic Blueberries Don't Come Easily



Jessica Kourkounis for The New York Times

HARVEST Reyna Garcia, 50, and other migrant workers pick organic blueberries at Big Buck Farms in Hammonton.

By TAMMY LA GORCE
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Organic blueberries at Big Buck Farms.

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Burlington County.

Blueberry plants are native to New Jersey, Dr. Oudemans said, which makes them a natural food choice for native insects.

NEW JERSEY is one of the country's top producers of blueberries, yet only a small number of farms are organic. And considering all the obstacles presented by nature, it's not hard to understand why.

Insects like the root grub and the plum curculio, as well as some fungi, contribute to organic farmers' loss of up to 50 percent of their berries a season, whereas conventional farmers may lose 5 percent or 6 percent, said Peter Oudemans, a Rutgers professor and a plant pathologist at [the Philip E. Marucci Center for Blueberry and Cranberry Research](#) in Chatsworth,

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PICK YOUR OWN Emery's Organic Blueberry Farm in New Egypt hires local students, like Markhus Lacroix, for the summer.

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One of the owners of Emery's Organic Blueberry Farm is John Marchese, at an irrigation pump.

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Emery's Organic Berry Farm lets customers do their own harvesting.

many papers, et cetera.”

Emery's, a 60-acre property that Mr. Marchese owns with his mother, Susan, was bought by his parents 10 years ago (his father died shortly afterward). It is the only certified organic pick-your-own blueberry farm in New Jersey, Mr. Bremer said.

Mr. Marchese began harvesting his organic blueberries on Monday, and his season will run into early August. Another organic grower, Elizabeth Kalani-Condo, 39, said, “The business has gone crazy.” She and her husband, Louis Condo, own the 120-acre [Big Buck Farms](#) in Hammonton, which is planted with 80 acres of organic blueberries. Mr. Condo said they were now producing twice as many berries as five years ago.

Big Buck's blueberries, available in markets across the country, are sold under the name Little Buck Organics and private labels, including [Trader Joe's](#) and [Safeway](#). The farm, certified in 2003, also sells its berries to Community Supported Agriculture networks, in which businesses and individuals go directly to the farm to buy by the crate, consisting of 12 pints or half-pints.

Unlike Mr. Marchese, who hires a dozen or so local high school students each season to help with tractor-driving and berry-packing, the Condos arranged for about 120 pickers to come from Florida to stay at the farm in trailers. Ms. Kalani-Condo spent much of a recent morning filling out paperwork and accompanying a state inspector who was looking at the workers' living quarters on the property, which is dotted with tall, cylindrical bug traps

“Planting a solid acre of organic blueberries in New Jersey is like throwing a peanut butter sandwich into a room full of kindergartners,” said Dr. Oudemans, of Hammonton, “the blueberry capital of the world,” according to a local highway sign. “Everything around is going to go for them.”

And with the New Jersey blueberry season just under way, that includes people willing to pay a premium for organic produce.

“My problem is I can't grow enough blueberries,” said John Marchese, 39, who has 20 acres planted at his [Emery's Organic Blueberry Farm](#), a pick-your-own operation and market here in central New Jersey. “Every year we get bombed — the phone never stops ringing and people never stop coming. They ask for directions from the Holland Tunnel, or as they're crossing the Delaware River. It can be completely overwhelming.”

Besides bugs and fungi, birds, weeds and plant diseases challenge the state's organic farmers, who are [certified by one of numerous agencies](#) and whose fields must be free of chemical insecticides and fertilizers for at least three years before they can harvest an organic crop.

Some 300 New Jersey farms cultivated blueberries in 2007, a spokeswoman for the State Department of Agriculture said, citing federal statistics. But there are just four certified organic farms in the state whose primary crop is blueberries, said Erich Bremer, supervisor of the organic certification program at the Agriculture Department. “Many folks will take shots at the organic certification process,” Mr. Bremer said, but “it's too much, too expensive, too



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provided under contract by Rutgers University. Steps from the Condos' house, a worker readied the processing plant, in which the berries are sorted for ripeness and firmness.

"We have to do twice the work of conventional growers," Mr. Condo said. "It's a lot harder and much more labor-intensive. Conventional farmers probably get around two or three thousand crates per acre. We're lucky if we get 700 to 900." Big Buck is likely to produce 500,000 pounds of berries this season.

"We get so many e-mails from people everywhere, thanking us for doing organic and telling us how much they love our berries," said Mr. Condo, who grows three varieties. The Condos began harvesting this month and hope to keep going into the first week of August.

Mr. Marchese said he would try to hold the price of his berries to \$3 a pint this season. At Big Buck, Ms. Kalani-Condo said she expected a crate of half-pints to range from \$12 to \$19, and a crate of pints to be \$20 to \$29.

In New Jersey, Dr. Oudemans said, there is every reason to expect the season to be robust. "We had high temperatures this spring when we needed them, and lots of water, and the bees were active, which sets us up pretty nicely," he said. "It should be a great year."

Where to Find Them

BIG BUCK FARMS, 345 Columbia Road, Hammonton. (609) 704-7622; littlebuckorganics.com.

EMERY'S ORGANIC BLUEBERRY FARM, 346 Long Swamp Road, New Egypt. emerysfarm.com; (609) 758-8514. Check ahead for pick-your-own dates, times and conditions.

ATLANTIC BLUEBERRY COMPANY sells certified organic berries, when available, to drive-up customers at 6200 Black Horse Pike (Route 322), Mays Landing. It also grows berries conventionally in Hammonton and Mays Landing. (609) 625-1155; atlanticblueberry.com.

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