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Van Diepen, Strong embrace niche farming with



Warren Strong, left, and Patricia Van Diepen, framed in the foreground by black currant plants from their nursery business, in the back by haskap berry bushes, have embraced the mixed challenge and opportunity of niche-market farming on a 40-acre former tobacco farm east of Otterville.

Patricia van Diepen and Warren Strong's route to the country was not about to economically pass through 3,000 acres of corn, beans and wheat ground. "And the half-a-million-dollar combine," laughed Strong. "Hence the niche crops."

She, along with her life and business partner, spent two full years searching out Plaid Shirt Farm's 40 acres of former tobacco ground east of Otterville. They quite literally began laying down roots in June, 2017, personally and otherwise: planting the first black currant block their first week. "We didn't unpack our boxes, we unpacked boxes of plants," van Diepen laughed.

For her, the venture marked a return to rural roots, a childhood enjoyably spent on a family apple orchard outside of Sarnia. "I love agriculture," said the Canada GAP auditor and consultant. "All the seasons, when things are planted, watching the crops grow and the harvest. Knowing full well, winter is planning time for next season."

Although the couple definitely shares vision and workload, van Diepen would be more the horticulturalist. "I'm kind of like the design, build and fix-it guy," smiled Strong. "Which there's lots of here."

Researching an appropriate niche crop outside of a highly-competitive marketplace was also a lengthy process. The couple considered and rejected options including tart dwarf cherry trees, blueberries, hops and also took a lengthy



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Haskap berries, black currants

look at vegetables. "But it's just the two of us, with a bit of outside labour," van Diepen explained.

Their initial black currant planting began producing at a couple of years of age, and will be around four to five feet when fully-mature, says van Diepen.

The couple began planting Haskap bushes in the fall of 2018 and anticipate their first level of meaningful production this year. Fully mature between five and eight years, they will last 15-plus van Diepen estimates, peaking out physically around four to five feet in height, "Similar to a blueberry bush."

The couple has planted roughly 12 acres of Haskap bushes and an additional seven of black currants supported by drip irrigation the couple installed themselves, which also supplies fertigation.

Known in the United States as honeyberries and camerise in Quebec, cold-hardy Haskaps are native to the northern boreal forests of North America, Asia and Europe and were initially introduced to Canada commercially as Blue Honeysuckle or Sweet Berry Honeysuckle. Widely used as an ornamental shrub, the berries were anything but sweet. In the late 1990's, Dr. Maxine Thompson of Oregon State University, and Dr. Bob Bors of the University of Saskatchewan began breeding and developing Haskap cultivars with improved flavours and harvest traits that have led to the marketable fruit we have today.

They are a football-shaped fruit with a 'sweet/tart' taste says van Diepen, likening the flavour to a 'raspberry/blueberry' combination.

Haskaps love high organic-matter material due to their shallow root system, as well as fertilizer. Mulch acts as weed control and moisture retention, and also moderates root temperature to slow down haskap's tendency to bloom early.

Black currant bushes are pruned in March, Haskaps the previous fall in large part because of their April bloom.

Crops have been picked so far with the help of all-local labour, but as two acres grows into ten and beyond, additional mechanization in the form of a Polish-designed and built haskap/black currant harvester will be sourced.

Haskaps are harvested from mid-June to early July, in something of a competition with feathered foes. "Birds love them," said Strong. "Love, love, love them," he added, noting netting is the most effective counter-measure. "You can lose your crop in a matter of days."

A historically narrow harvest window has been extended through breeding and developing alternative cultivars, however they can come on quickly, he adds. "When they are ripe, they are ripe."

Black currants are harvested mid-July to August, spreading of seasons allowing the couple to personally cover more responsibilities.

Those two crops are Plaid Shirt Farms' priority, however they stepped into a niche for black currant bush propagation created by retirement of Canada's black currant breeder in British Columbia. Cuttings are taken from existing nursery plants, grown

out and then sold to commercial growers across Canada. "We are the sole propagation distributor of these plants," said van Diepen.

The couple also has smaller sidelines including a few red currant bushes, gooseberries, garlic, hydroponic lettuce and their own honey-producing beehives. They are also considering the possible addition of a 'pick-your-own' fall pumpkin patch to more fully utilize their acreage.

As well as selling black currants fresh and frozen, the couple processes their own small batch preserves and condiments inside a commercial kitchen. The current line features seven different black currant products including the more traditional jam, sauce, juice and tart filling, as well as flavour-enhanced options such as black currant chutney and mustard or habanero jam, the latter relative to red pepper jelly. A companion haskap preserves line is currently in development. "I just don't know what that will be, yet," van Diepen smiled.

The flavour combinations are products of her experimentation, more precisely, the successful results. "Yes, I've had some flops," van Diepen laughed. "But those go into Warren's dessert instead of a jar."

Apart from furthering debate around appropriate butter tart ingredients, black currants are also frozen and used for juice that can be processed into bitters or black currant cassis, a liqueur prepared by Dillon's Distillery in Beamsville.

Haskap berries are extremely high in anti-oxidants and also eaten fresh, frozen, processed into smoothies or juices for straight up drinking, wines, gin and kombucha, a fermented 'tea.'

"That's the new health thing," Strong smiled. "The kids are drinking it."



The current Plaid Shirt Farms black currant preserves line.

Plaid Shirt Farms products are on offer in several locations around Ontario including Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese, where black currant chutney, black currant habanero jam and mustard are seen as great companions for cheese platters.

Considerations to enter farmer's markets or speciality craft marketplaces have been curtailed by COVID-19. Strong and van Diepen did begin opening their own onsite retail outlet Saturdays until noon, and plan to do so again in 2021. They also offer online sales including honey through their website: <https://plaidshirtfarms.com>.

The couple enters 2021 with 'nervous excitement', rising to the mixed challenge and opportunity of more product coming online and growing their opportunities, in the midst of a global pandemic. Despite the ongoing challenges of transitioning to niche farming under any circumstances, the parameters are those they both accept around a journey they continue to embrace.

"It's a process, a labour of love, really," Van Diepen said. "There is a lot of work, but it's not a job," she added. "If you love what you do, it's not a job."

"Jobs are those places you show up for pay, not because you want to be there," Strong agreed in conclusion. 🌱

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