

**A Rose by Any Other Name:
This Member of the rose family may not bloom with the same
extravagance of its ornamental cousins, but the fruit of its humbler
blossom is worth a family secret.**

by Amy Jo Ehman

The problem was the map.

We were seven people in three cars heading to one secret spot at the end of an unmarked prairie trail. We were going to pick saskatoons. Our destination was an uninhabited quarter section on the South Saskatchewan River originally homesteaded by my great-great-grandfather. Only I knew the route. And like a true prairie soul with a private stash of saskatoon bushes, I was reluctant to reveal the location. Generations of prairie people have kept this secret. Making a map felt like treason.

"Could you collect the maps afterward and burn them," asked my mother?

I drew the map.

Picking saskatoons was a summer ritual of my childhood. In mid-July, we would load up the truck with empty paint cans, plastic wastubs and a picnic. We wore long sleeved shirts and pants, despite the heat, so we could push deeper into the bushes in search of the perfect tree where berries hung large and purple like tiny bunches of grapes (our fingers and lips stained purple by the juice).

The reward came in the middle of a harsh prairie winter: hot saskatoon pie for Christmas dinner.

The saskatoon berry has been feeding prairie people for centuries. It grows wild in river valleys where aboriginal people came in summer to hunt, make arrows and gather supplies for the winter months. The Cree call the berry missaskquatoomina. It was an important nutrient in their diet and a critical ingredient in the making of pemmican, a blend of berries, fat and dried meat. They introduced this food to explorers, missionaries and settlers as they arrived in the western wilds of the continent.

In 1810, explorer David Thompson wrote in his journal:

"The berry grows abundantly on willow-like shrubs, is of the color of deep blue, or black; the size of a full-grown pea, very sweet and nourishing, the favorite food of small birds, and the Bears. They are very wholesome, and may safely be eaten as long as the appetite continues; they are much sought after by the natives, they collect and dry them in quantities for future use; and mixed with pemmican, becomes a rich and agreeable food. The wood is of a fine size for arrows, and where this can be got, no other is employed; it is weighty, pliant, and non-elastic. As this berry is preceded by a beautiful flower, and the berry is rich as an currant from Smyrna and keeps as well, it ought to be cultivated in Canada, and in England."

In August 1883, a scouting party of settlers from Toronto reached their homestead lands on the South Saskatchewan River. They were members of the Temperance Colonization Society led by Methodist minister John Lake. Lake declared it the perfect spot for their new community. He was about to put the hardy saskatoon berry on the map.

He recalled in his memoirs that a young man brought him a handful of berries: "I asked him the name (for they looked like red currants) he said they call them saskatoons. In an instant I remarked, 'Arise Saskatoon Queen of the North.' We were all very delighted."

The story brings a chuckle to Richard St. Pierre, head of the saskatoon berry research project at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. He knows that saskatoon berries are well past their prime in August, and those that remain are deep purple, not red.

"Given the time of year and the colour of the fruit that were brought to him, it really points in the direction of chokecherries," says Pierre.

"Though I think that Saskatoon is just as good a name."

The saskatoon resembles a blueberry in size and colour, but it is more closely related to members of the rose family. The fruit is not a true berry, but a tiny apple. The genus name AMELANCHIER is derived from a Celtic word for 'small apple'.

The shrub was first cultivated on the prairies early this century, more than a hundred years after David Thompson's prophetic suggestion. Today, there are an estimated 1,000 acres of saskatoons under cultivation in Saskatchewan.

We wore long sleeved shirts and pants, despite the heat, so we could push deeper into the bushes in search of the perfect tree where berries hung large and purple like tiny bunches of grapes.

Lee Whittington's boots are heavy with mud as he walks through his orchard on Valley Road, south of Saskatoon. Lee, his wife Grace, and their three children manage 14 acres of saskatoon bushes, supplying fruit for their line of processed foods bearing the label Riverbend Plantation. They produce jam, syrup, pie filling, tea, a sparkling non-alcoholic wine and chocolates.

We walk as we talk and eat as we walk. The berries stain my fingertips. At the end of a row, a hired picker is pouring saskatoons from his hand pail into a large white bucket. Each bucket is numbered and will be recorded later at the weigh station. These berries are called smokey. They are more musty than sweet: grape-like. The smokey is popular because it holds its flavour during processing.

"This is probably the most popular variety in Saskatchewan," says Lee. "The darker they are, the better they are."

The next row is a lower bush called Northlines. These berries are sweet. Ideal for selling as fresh fruit, they fetch more than \$9 a kilogram. Another row called Thiessen is juicy, not too sweet, with a musty, earthy flavour. This is the saskatoon of my youth.

"These are my favourite," says Lee. "These are the berries I prefer on my cereal in the morning."

Says Grace: "We keep them separate because we have different uses for the berries. Some go into pie filling. Some go to the fresh market. Some go into jam."

Despite the modern names and neat, long rows, these saskatoons are not far from their wild origins. Every variety in cultivation was started with seeds from a wild berry chosen for its superior natural qualities. There has been no breeding program to improve the flavour, size or hardiness of saskatoons. Only irrigation and disease control separate the cultivated berry from its wild ancestor.

At 10 am, field supervisor Linda Wyteck blows her whistle, calling the pickers into the weigh station. The berries are weighed and whisked off to the farmyard where they are cleaned, sorted and -- for berries that will be processed -- quickly frozen.

The Whittingtons employ as many as 100 pickers during the harvest. A good picker can collect more than 12 kilograms of berries in two hours. A daydreamer may get three. They are paid \$1.70 to \$2.30 per kilogram.

"We have a lot to learn about this crop but that's part of the excitement," says Lee. "It's not like corn or soybeans where there's volumes and volumes written about them. You can phone up researchers just about anywhere in the world and get good information about those crops. We don't even know the recommended fertilization rates for saskatoons. It's never been studied."

The Saskatchewan government is promoting the saskatoon as a lucrative cash crop for prairie farmers. It is funding ground-breaking research to produce a better berry, and Richard St. Pierre says the economic potential is great.

"One of our biggest producers, Barry Isaac at Last Mountain Berry Farms at Southey, says he could use a million pounds of fruit every year. He says there's a market in the United States. But he can't access that market because there isn't enough fruit consistently available."

Genetic research at the U of S began with a newspaper ad.

"I asked people to send me fresh berries from the wild," says research Annette Zatylny. She was overwhelmed with luscious frozen berries. Zatylny is looking for exceptional qualities from these samples: high yielding, juicy and resistant to the insects and diseases that periodically ravage the wild berries.

Seeds were taken from the samples and grown in the university greenhouse. The seedlings will be planted in locations around the province and be evaluated after five years.

"For example," says Zatylny, "if we find some trees that are disease resistant, we'll do some cross-breeding with other desirable cultivars. This way we'll try to get a tree that has good fruit and is resistant to disease."

There could be a reward for generous berry pickers that answered the ad: new cultivars developed from their wild berries would bear their family name.

That, to be sure, won't be my name. After an abundant wild harvest shared with friends in 1998, the harvest of '99 is not good on the homestead. The saskatoon berries are sparse and shrivelled, victims to common fungus called entomosporium.

On the drive back to Saskatoon, I pull off the road at the sign of the Berry Barn U-Pick. Neat rows of bushes stretch from the road down to the riverbank. I take my ice cream pail and start picking. U-pick farms are making it easier for prairie people to get their annual stock of saskatoons. Fill your own bucket for \$10: no brambles and no disappointments. It's a small price to pay for the pleasure of a saskatoon berry pie on a cold winter's day.

Note Saskatoon picking has developed since this article was written. The berries are now mechanically picked by a machine similar to one used to pick blackcurrants.*