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Agricultural Partnership**

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ELLA'S FOREST

*Helping keep farms
in the green*



Canada

INNOVATIVE HARVESTING HEAD BOOSTS SUSTAINABILITY FOR ORGANIC BLUEBERRY FARM

Since starting his certified organic blueberry farm in Fort Augustus with his family over 15 years ago, Willie Bevan has had sustainability at the top of mind. Named after his daughter, Ella's Forest is a certified organic wild blueberry farm that also produces powders and teas for the international market.

Willie has always been careful to disturb the soil on his land as little as possible, accepting the challenges of wild blueberry harvesting and the ferocity of weeds on an organic farm. But that all changed one day when he had a little help from a neighbour.

Like many properties on Prince Edward Island following Hurricane Fiona in 2022, Ella's Forest dealt with downed trees throughout their farm in the wake of the storm. Several of these fallen trees were blocking a narrow lane to one of Willie's fields. It takes two years for a blueberry plant to produce fruit. Unable to access the field with his own equipment and unwilling to lose his crop, Willie reached out to a fellow farmer for help.

Not only did his friend harvest the crop beautifully, but he simultaneously created an accidental solution to Willie's weeding woes.

"It was impossible for our larger harvesting equipment to get in there. When we were watching him work, we couldn't help but notice how he was able to dance around the weeds with ease and still harvest a great round berry."

His friend was using a specialized DH harvesting head.

Hoping it wasn't just a coincidence, Willie tested the equipment on a larger field. He quickly noticed the difference from their usual harvester and knew he had stumbled onto something!

The specialized harvesting head is robust but gentle. The fine teeth are able to comb through



Willie Bevan and his daughter, Ella, the farm's namesake.

weeds and separate berries from plants with ease, making harvest efficient and limiting damage to the berry crop. More maneuverable and much lighter than Willie's usual harvester, it also causes less compaction, which protects both the soil and the surrounding pollinator-friendly areas.

The goal, he says, is to build a sustainable business, and a farm for future generations.

So, after seeing the success of the equipment firsthand, Willie was excited to embrace a change in order to continue evolving the sustainable practices on his farm.

Willie was able to purchase a new harvesting head of his own and increase farm productivity and crop quality with support from the federal-provincial Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership (Sustainable CAP). He was able to attach his new equipment to a tractor he previously owned, making it easily maneuverable and allowing Willie to access hard-to-reach areas of the farm without damaging the surrounding environment and keeping pollinator habitats untouched.

The addition of the new equipment has increased sustainability on the farm while yielding a better final product, giving Willie a competitive advantage in his industry.

Willie has utilized Sustainable CAP programing not only to harvest his crop more efficiently but also after harvest, to produce a unique final product.

In 2024, he took part in the Sustainable CAP's Organic Industry Development Program, which helped fund a Harvest Saver Dryer.

Easy to operate and maintain, Willie has used this machine for years to create his world-famous blueberry powder. Being able to purchase a second one has allowed him to keep up with increasing market demand and enabled him to create a wild blueberry powder that exceeds industry standards.

"The quality, smell, and color of the powder is unmatched. Demand continues to grow, and with the addition of the second machine, we are ready for it."

Willie hopes that by sharing his innovative practices with others, Ella's Forest could help develop a model for Island farmers who are considering the transition to organic farming.

"I hope this can be an example for other growers who are curious about the organic market. By continuing to look for sustainable solutions, we are setting up the next generation for success."



Willie has implemented innovative solutions to save time, improve berry quality, and reduce soil compaction, reducing overall field disturbance and preserving pollinator zones.