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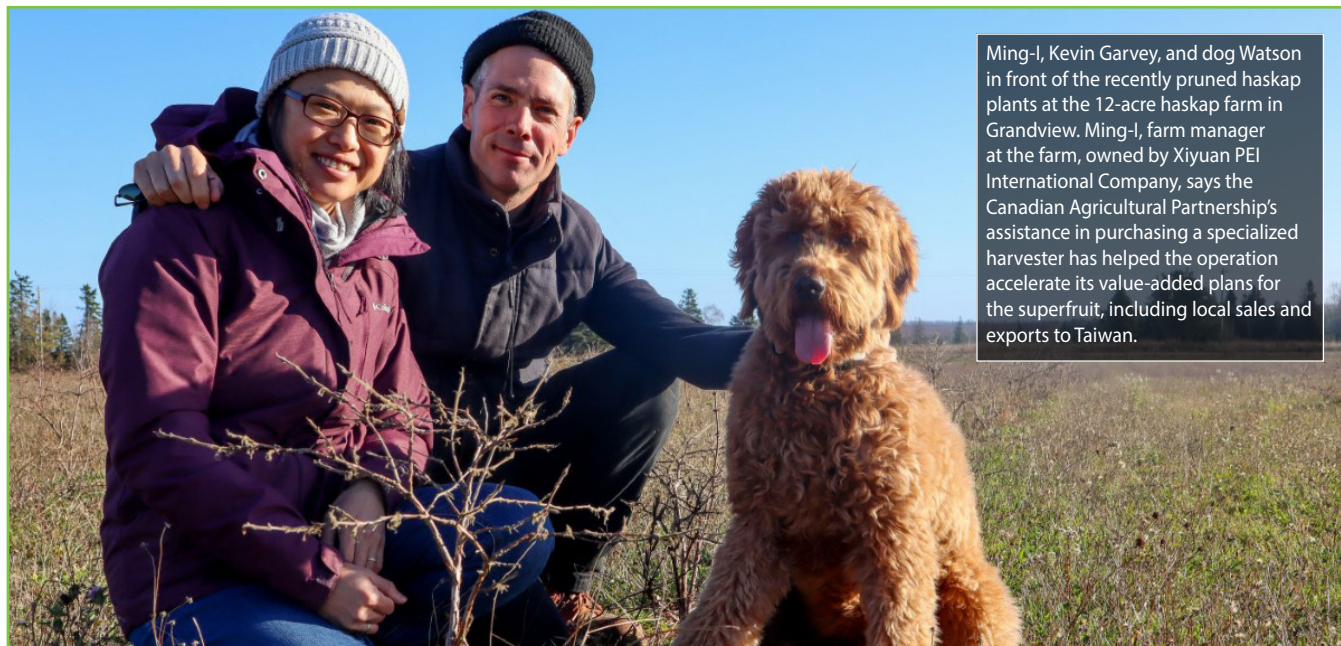
Haskap Farm

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Canada

Haskap farm's plan for commercial production picks up speed with new harvester



Ming-I, Kevin Garvey, and dog Watson in front of the recently pruned haskap plants at the 12-acre haskap farm in Grandview. Ming-I, farm manager at the farm, owned by Xiyuan PEI International Company, says the Canadian Agricultural Partnership's assistance in purchasing a specialized harvester has helped the operation accelerate its value-added plans for the superfruit, including local sales and exports to Taiwan.

When Ming-I came to PEI from Taiwan to develop a new haskap berry farm in Grandview, she was pretty sure she was going to enjoy it.

She didn't realize it was going to become a labour of love.

"We met here at the farm," she says of her husband, tree specialist Kevin Garvey. "He came in to plant some black walnuts on the property. Now we've been married for over a year and our daughter Cecilia was born in October."

If it's been quite a year for the couple, it's also been quite a year for the farm. Commercialization plans for the 12 acres of organically grown super fruit picked up speed this season, thanks to a new harvester that looks like a car wash.

"What the harvester does in a week would take hundreds of pickers to do by hand," says Ming-I, farm manager for Xiyuan PEI International Company, a group of Taiwanese investors who have been developing the haskap farm since 2016.

The company bought the Pro Berry harvester, made by Quebec manufacturer Pro Innov, shortly before the 2022 harvest with help from PEI's Perennial Crop Development Program under the federally and provincially funded Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

Open at the front and the back and standing nearly seven feet high, the harvester is pulled like a sidecar over the plants while the tractor powering it is driven between the rows. Inside, rolling drums with long teeth rake the canopy of the haskap plants, knocking the berries onto moveable plates on the floor that open and close around the stem of the plant. From there, the berries roll on to a conveyor belt and then through a fan box that blows away leaves and twigs before gently depositing the berries into a container.

"It's an innovative piece of technology," says Garvey, who doesn't work for Xiyuan PEI International Company but has been helping Ming-I fine-tune the crop and the harvester to maximize the yield.

After this year's harvest in early July, they dramatically pruned back the farm's 12,000 plants to encourage new growth with a specific shape in mind.

"There is a sweet spot that works best with the harvester, where the plant is about four or five feet tall, with branches coming out about five inches from a single stem," he says. "It reduces the number of berries that might slip through the plates as they are opening and closing."

Ming-I says they hope to harvest up to six pounds of berries per plant as they reach their full potential over the next three years.

The farm grows two varieties of haskaps, Indigo Glen and Tundra, with a third, Czech 17, used as a pollinator. The berries, which look like elongated blueberries, have their own tart, sweet taste that some people liken to a cross between blueberries, raspberries and black currants.

"In my opinion, they have a much more complex taste than blueberries," says Garvey.

With the harvester in place, Ming-I says the focus is now on building a 13-foot by 18-foot walk-in cold storage room for the berries.



Storage will play a key role in the company's marketing plans, which include fresh and frozen berries and freeze dried haskap powder for Canadian and Taiwanese markets.

The company is currently in talks with a Canadian grocery retailer and Ming-I is looking at options for installing freeze-dried production on the farm.

"You can dehydrate the berries and turn them into a powder but freeze-drying is better because it preserves more of their nutrients," she says.

While the haskap berry does not yet have the name recognition of blueberries in Canada, Ming-I says haskaps are sought after in Taiwan, Japan and many other countries because of their associated health properties.

According to the Haskap Canada Association, the berries are rich in Vitamin C and A and have high levels of antioxidants associated with disease prevention and a healthy immune system.

Ming-I says the company was attracted to PEI after hearing about the Island's climate and growing conditions from the Island Buddhist community.

"The shareholders, including my father, were interested in organic farming and in developing a crop on PEI that would be friendly to the soil," she says.

Innovation PEI suggested haskap berries.

"It's been a good option as an organic crop because the berry likes a cooler climate and PEI has the perfect growing conditions, not too hot and not too cold, so there are not very many pressures on the plant," says Garvey.

They have even found a natural solution to birds feasting on the berries - a falcon called a kestrel has been nesting on the site for the last couple of years and is keeping the birds away.

Ming-I doesn't have a farming background and admits that growing haskaps has been a steep learning curve.

But she says the Perennial Crop Development Program and the provincial crop specialists who support it have been a huge help.

“Luckily, the government and a lot of people have been helping me get through this,” she says.

“It has definitely helped move the project along a little faster,” adds Garvey. “Everything is coming together quite quickly now which is allowing Ming-I and the company to zero in on the next phase, which is marketing.”

They both say that the haskap industry is developing the infrastructure to become a significant crop on PEI.

“We are looking at the apple industry as an inspiration,” says Garvey. “Thirty years ago, it didn’t have much of a presence. Today, PEI has half a million trees and produces a lot of different products.”

While Ming-I and Garvey continue to find innovative ways to develop the haskap farm, the realities of doing that with a new baby are creating a learning curve of their own.

“We’re learning to innovate, as well,” she says with a laugh.