

From Common Land to Commodity

After the Civil War, the potential of the wild blueberry to be a marketable product rather than simply serving as a subsistence and seasonal food source was starting to be realized. The technological innovation of the canning process greatly increased the shelf life of wild blueberries and made them easier to transport. The wild blueberry was on its way to becoming an agricultural commodity.

The first commercial blueberry cannery opened in Cherryfield, Maine in 1866. Many other blueberry canneries followed, including the one started by Jasper Wyman in Milbridge, Maine, in 1876. Over time, both the Cherryfield and Milbridge regions became important centers of blueberry processing, and today they are home to Cherryfield Foods Inc. and Wyman's, two of the most recognized names in Maine's wild blueberry industry. While these companies are well-known, there are hundreds of Maine blueberry farms across the state managing thousands of acres of wild blueberry fields.

Once science made it possible to preserve and store wild blueberries more effectively, several other hurdles remained before they could become a reliable commercial crop. Chief among these was land ownership, as the barrens where blueberries grew had long been treated as common or loosely claimed land.



Two Men Stacking Cans of Wild Blueberries
George French Collection 1937
Maine State Archives

Prior to the Civil War, the barrens didn't hold much value. They were poor land for growing traditional agricultural crops and timber. They were simply there, growing blueberries that were free for the taking.



Workers Raking Blueberries
George French Collection 1937
Maine State Archives

By the 1870s, wild blueberries were becoming big business, but one important question had not been answered: Who owned the berries? Did they belong to the landowner or to the person who picked them? In 1877, that question reached the Maine Supreme Judicial Court in the case of Freeman v. Underwood. William Freeman Jr. of Cherryfield claimed that people were picking blueberries from his land without permission. He also objected to the fires they set to encourage new blueberry growth, which sometimes spread into valuable timber, and to the pickers camping on his property and using its resources without paying him. After berries from Freeman's land were sold to a cannery, he sued blueberry processor William Underwood, asking the court to decide who legally owned the crop. The court ultimately ruled that the blueberries belonged to the landholder, not the pickers or the

processors. Moreover, even processors who purchased the berries in good faith could be held responsible if the berries had been gathered without the landowner's permission. This decision established that control of the land meant control of what grew on it and, in practice, placed new responsibility on buyers to ensure berries were harvested legally. It marked a turning point, shifting blueberries from a commonly gathered natural resource to a managed and owned crop. This decision helped lay the legal foundation for landowners to lease blueberry barrens to growers, establish clear ownership rights, and invest in improving and managing the land. These changes encouraged the growth of a more organized and profitable wild blueberry industry.

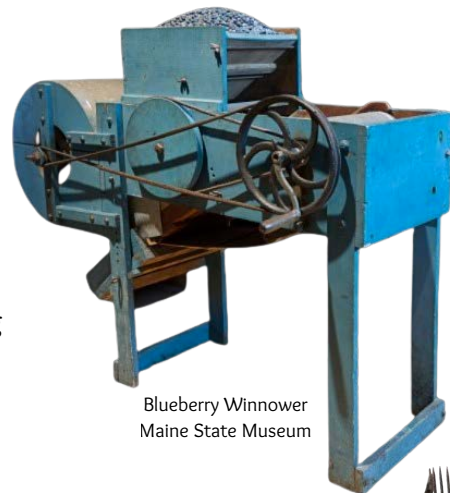
Harvesting technology was another major hurdle for the wild blueberry industry to overcome. Early picking was done by hand. This was slow, labor-intensive, and limited how many berries could be collected in a short 4-6 week season. As demand grew, the need for more efficient methods led to innovations like the blueberry rake, invented by Abijah Tabbot in the 1880s, which allowed pickers to harvest larger quantities more quickly. Cleaning and separating blueberries was also a challenging and time-consuming task that involved screening berries and removing leaves, stems, and debris by hand.

In 1926, Emil Rivers of Rockland patented the first blueberry winnower. The winnower, a machine designed to remove leaves and debris from the berries, was adapted from a bean winnower to meet the needs of blueberry processing.



Winnowing Blueberries
George French Collection 1937
Maine State Archives

SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT OF MAINE. 1871



Blueberry Winnower
Maine State Museum

A winnower is a tool that uses air to blow away light waste and leave behind the heavier food, like grains and berries.



Blueberry Rake

In the 1920s food preservation underwent another substantial development with the invention of the industrial freezing process by Clarence Birdseye. In the early 1900s Birdseye began work as a naturalist for the U.S. Government in the Arctic. Birdseye noticed that the mix of ice, wind, and cold temperatures could freeze freshly caught fish almost right away. Even more important, when the fish were later cooked and eaten, they tasted and felt nearly the same as fresh fish. Birdseye realized that people back home would be willing to buy frozen foods if he could make them easily available. He went back to New York and, in 1924, started his company, Birdseye Seafoods, Inc. While over time the methods he developed have been improved upon,

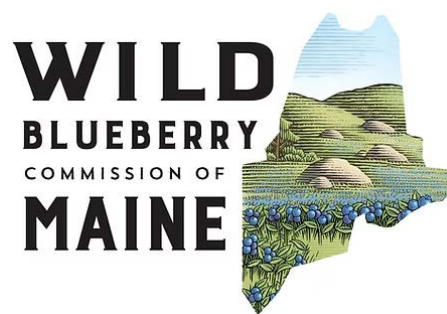
the basic principle of his freezing process has remained the same and is responsible for bringing flash frozen fruits, vegetables, and meats to the masses.

The development of the flash freezing process was embraced by wild blueberry processors as a superior way to preserve the harvest and by the 1940s most blueberries were being frozen. Today, 99% of the blueberry harvest is frozen, usually within 24 hours of being picked. This flash-freezing method helps lock in essential vitamins and nutrients.



Wyman's frozen
wild blueberries

In the 1940s, wild blueberry growers recognized the need to come together to support, promote, and protect their growing industry. Through a self-imposed tax, Maine blueberry growers chose to invest in their future by funding research at the University of Maine and supporting efforts to promote their crop. In 1945, this effort led to the creation of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine, established by state law to manage these funds. The Commission continues to play an active role today in advancing research, marketing, and the long-term success of Maine's wild blueberry industry.



Harvesting Equipment

While these innovations transformed how blueberries are harvested and processed, they also changed the human side of the industry. Earlier harvesting relied heavily on manual labor, often involving long hours and limited protections for workers. The use of child labor was also common during peak harvest seasons, reflecting the labor practices of the time. Over time, labor laws, safety standards, and worker protections have improved, helping to create safer working conditions and fairer practices. Today, the wild blueberry industry continues to evolve, balancing efficiency and production with a growing awareness of the people and communities who make the harvest possible.

Much of the success of the wild blueberry industry is due to the hard work of blueberry farmers, but it is also the result of their understanding that

strong marketing and ongoing research can drive growth, improve quality, and expand markets for their crop. From this research, many improvements have been made to mechanize the industry through advances in harvesting equipment, cleaning and sorting systems, and freezing and processing technologies, helping growers increase efficiency while maintaining the quality of the berries.

The wild blueberry is more than just a crop to the people of Maine. In 1991, Megan Frank, a fifth grader from Manchester, Maine, successfully petitioned the state legislature to name the wild blueberry as Maine's official state fruit. The story of the wild blueberry and its journey to our tables honors generations of farmers, reflects the deep roots of the berry in Maine's history, and highlights its cultural and economic importance. From Wabanaki knowledge and foodways to modern harvesting and research, the wild blueberry remains a symbol of resilience, connection to the land, and the people who continue to care for it.

