

Westberry Farms

A Family Blueberry Business Taking on the International Market

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Parmjit “Parm” and Satwinder Bains founded Westberry Farms (Westberry) in 1997. With a degree in agricultural sciences, Parm had been involved in agriculture for many years. He and Satwinder took on farming, embracing sustainability and the rural lifestyle. Years later, they started Westberry together, taking on a growing market share of British Columbia-grown blueberries.

The family business in Abbotsford, British Columbia, has expanded from just growing blueberries into a packing, processing and marketing business for other regional farms. Westberry grows high-

bush blueberries on 250 acres and now represents 125 growers in British Columbia. As a result, the company has become a major player in the North American market with a growing presence overseas.

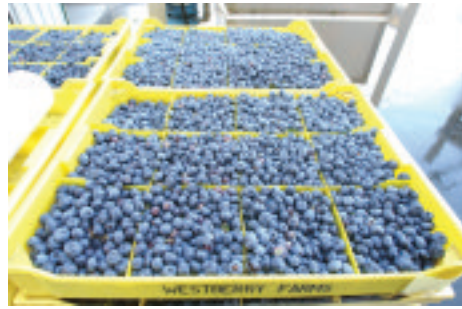
A Unique Market Share

“About 95 percent of high-bush blueberries grown in Canada are from British Columbia,” Parm notes. “At Westberry, we take our blueberries and our partners’ blueberries and sell 50 to 60 percent on the fresh market. The rest are frozen or packed as value-added product. We sell 30-pound cases of frozen blueberries



to industrial manufacturers that produce jams, jellies and purees and do poly bagging.”

Parm goes on to explain that a large percentage of Canadian frozen blueberries end up in the U.S. market. “The U.S. produces blueberries in 38 states all over the U.S. and since these states harvest at different times of the year, most are finished harvesting before B.C. comes on,” Parm continues. “As a result, because of our timing, we are fortunate that we don’t have to compete with a majority of their fresh product. We sell our fresh blueberries across Canada, with large markets in Ontario and Quebec, as well as in the U.S., focusing on the Midwest, east and west coast.”



The business has expanded overseas, with the largest markets in Japan and South Korea. “They love blueberries,” Parm explains. “When a patient goes to visit the doctor in Japan, the doctor often recommends they have a cupful of blueberries. Blueberries are reportedly good for eyesight. In Japan, there is a billboard of a baseball pitcher; because he has been having his blueberries, he has good vision for throwing the ball.”

Parm and his team are always looking for new markets. He sees potential in Hong Kong, Singapore,

India and China. “China is a little more difficult,” he notes. “We can ship fresh to Hong Kong, but not mainland China. In India there is a huge upcoming middle class that is educated, wealthy and overall a good future potential market. South Korea is opening doors, as well, as the country often follows Japan in food trends.”

A Little Help from His Friends

Westberry is involved with the British Columbia Blueberry Council, a grower association that works in cooperation with American grower organization USHBC, as well as with distributors, to promote

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blueberries on both sides of the border and the international market. Parm is quick to note that more countries across the world are growing more blueberries than in years past as people are attracted to the health benefit of the berries.

“With the health halo that blueberries have, especially with the antioxidant research that emerged around 2000, we have been able to pick up on that very effectively,” Parm says. “A recent consumer research survey found that 99 percent of Americans know blueberries to be healthy for you. We can penetrate the market on both the fresh and frozen side. This has become a growing industry globally. Everyone is interested. Mexico will be a major player in the years to come; Chile is a major player already along with Argentina. China is growing rapidly and India is starting to look into it and Europe has a fair amount.”

The council also helps Parm and his team to stay on top of changing regulations, whether that means food safety regulations at home or import requirements

abroad. “We are always upgrading our processing plant,” he continues. “We are food safety certified and we get one or two of our staff members to take courses that allow them to stay up-to-date on food safety practices. It is important for us to stay up-to-date and to make sure we don’t fall behind. Japan and other countries have distinct standards for minimum residue levels [MRL]. For the pesticides we use in Canada, some countries have different standards. This is a challenge globally. We are always promoting ourselves to be on top of issues, being proactive and staying on top of latest best practices.”

As the industry grows in leaps and bounds, Parm and his team are picking up their fair share of the market. Around 20 years ago, British Columbia produced approximately 20 million pounds of blueberries. In 2013, that number skyrocketed to 120 million pounds. While consumers are interested in the product, Parm knows that he cannot just let the blueberries sell themselves. His involvement in local, national and international trade organizations helps Westberry to continue to put forth strong marketing efforts to continue expanding its footprint.

Westberry started as a labor of love and continues to serve as both a passion and a business for Parm and Satwinder. No matter how much the market grows, the team remains dedicated to producing and marketing safe, delicious and attractive berries to distribute around the world. No matter where the berries take the company, from Europe to Southeast Asia, the team will continue to uphold the high standards that have made Westberry Farms successful for more than 15 years. •

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