

# Brothers Manage 1,300-Acre Blueberry Farm

**DAVE LEFEVER**  
Lancaster Farming Staff

HAMMONTON, N.J. — In 1935, five Galetta brothers began propagating blueberry plants and selling the fruit from three acres in this area of the Pinelands National Reserve.

The Galetta brothers' new venture, which in the early years also included cranberries, steadily increased in acreage and sales. In 1949 the brothers purchased Atlantic Blueberry Company, which today is home to 1,300 acres of blueberry bushes and modern packing facilities run by six Galettas — sons of the original five brothers.

"As far as we know, we have the largest cultivated blueberry farm anywhere," said Al Galetta, one of four senior partners at Atlantic Blueberry Company.

The Galettas ship blueberries across the U.S. and Canada. Some of their berries are even exported to England and Europe.

Atlantic Blueberry Company fruit also ends up in a lot of Dannon yogurt, Mrs. Smith's pies, and other items such as McDonalds and Kraft products, Galetta said.

Originally home to pine and oak trees, the sandy, acidic soils of Atlantic Blueberry Farm are well-suited to growing the berries, which prefer soil pH around 4.5-5.0. The Galettas grow a range of varieties, from early-season to late, to maximize the harvest period.

About 60 percent of the berries are picked by the hands of 2,000 seasonal workers. The other 40 percent are harvested by tall, blue, three-wheel machines that straddle the row and coax the berries from the shrubs by flexible, orbiting "fingers" that rotate on two vertical cylinders. The berries fall onto conveyors which carry them to the rear of the machine, where they drop into crates which are then stacked by a worker.

Most of the berries are harvested by hand when they first ripen. "It's best to go into all our fields the first and second time by hand," Al Galetta said. However, some varieties are better suited to a later mechanical picking.

The earliest varieties ripen in mid-June and the season continues until September with the late-maturing kinds. More than a dozen total varieties keep the harvesting season going for more than two months.

After picking, blueberries destined for fresh eating are brought to the packing house where they are washed, sorted, and packaged into "clamshell" containers. These pints are then packed in crates for shipping.

The sorting on conveyor belts is done both by hand and electronically, through photo cells that detect differences in berry color. Unacceptable fruit is sorted out by means of a computer that instructs tiny, targeted water jets inside a roller to shoot the bad berries out of the batch.

Fruit for processing is washed, sorted, and then frozen in an ammonia-based closed system called "individual-quick-freeze." In this process, the berries pass through a tunnel where they are frozen solid in about nine seconds, Galetta said. They are then automatically destemmed and packed into 10-, 20-, or 30-pound boxes for shipping.



This machine picks blueberries by means of flexible orbiting "fingers" on the two vertical cylinders.

The frozen berries for processing can keep for more than a year, Galetta said. Fresh berries have a shelf life of two to three weeks.

Several blueberry varieties were developed on Atlantic Blueberry Farm, including 'Duke' — named after Al's uncle Duke Galetta, one of the original five Galetta brothers in the blueberry business. 'Duke' berries are well-suited for machine harvesting, Al said. 'Bluetta' is another popular variety, taking its name from a combination of "blue" and "Galetta."

Duke did a lot of research on the farm, including blueberry trials conducted with the help of USDA and Rutgers University, Al said. Ways in which varieties can differ from each other include how sweet, firm, and big the berries are. The structure of the crown on the fruit is another factor.

The blueberry bushes are irrigated through solidset pipe and spray irrigation, with the water drawn from several wells on the farm and transported by a canal system to the fields. According to Galetta, water supply is not a problem.

"South New Jersey has one of the biggest aquifers anywhere," he said.

During the growing season the Galettas adhere to a 7-10 day spraying schedule to control disease and harmful insects such as blueberry maggot, leafrollers, and fruitworms. Hand pruning 1,300 acres of blueberry bushes is another big job which keeps part of the workforce on the farm through the winter. Pruning out dead and less productive branches begins in the fall and is finished around March.

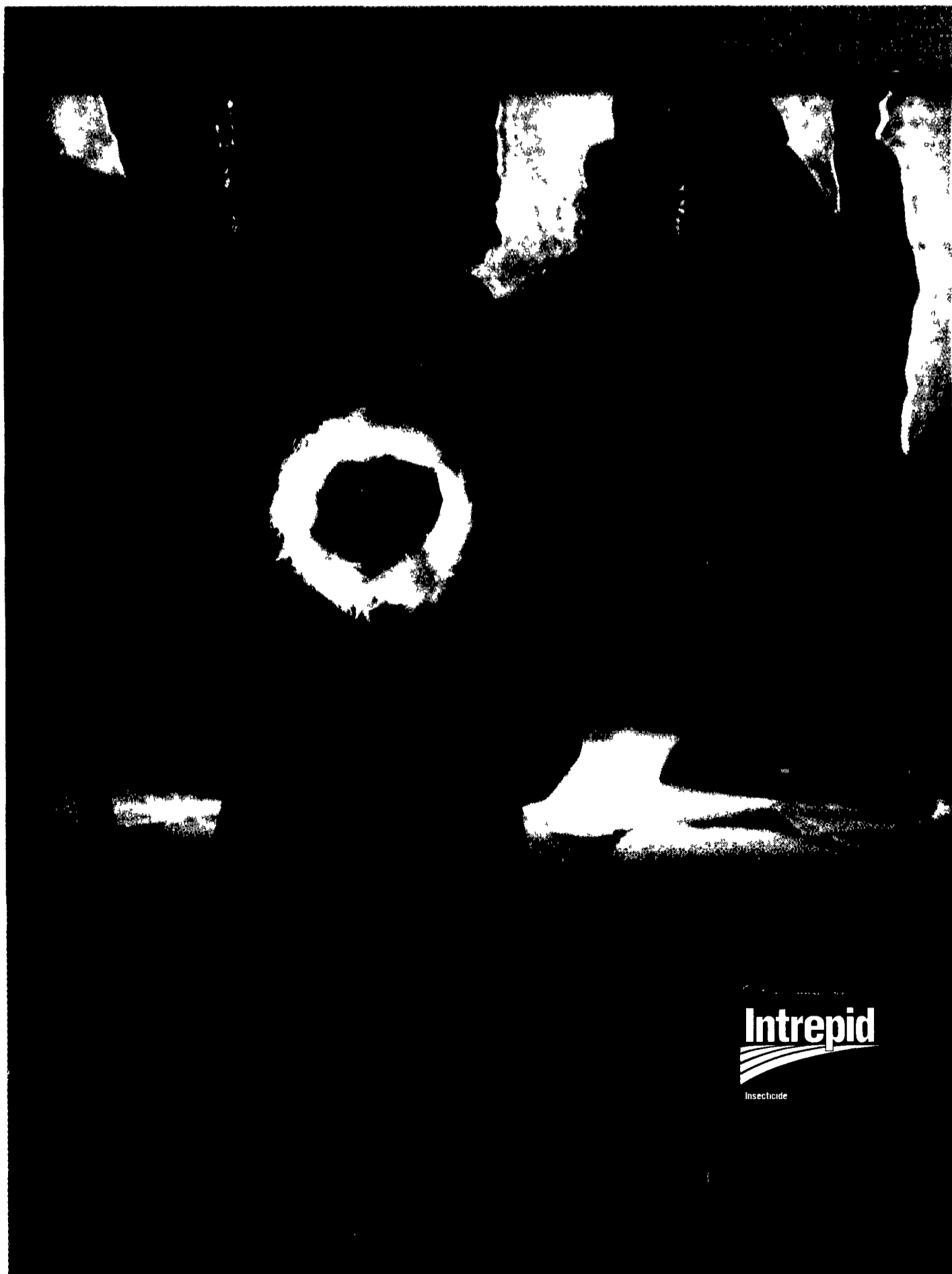


Early-season 'Weymouth' blueberries ripening on the Atlantic Blueberry Company farm.

As in all types of farming, markets are "hard to predict" in the blueberry business, Galetta said. However, the supply-and-demand market generally starts high early in the season and "drops accordingly."

With their company's long history and substantial list of buyers, the Galettas take blueberry orders long before the first fruit ripens. Late last May, Al commented on the status of the 2002 crop.

"All our berries are sold," he said.



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