



featured

RASPBERRY PATCH GROWS

By Jeff Edwards

Laramie Peak is the highest and most prominent peak in the Laramie Range of Wyoming.

The rain shadow of this peak and mountain range influences the rain and snow patterns and water availability for many miles east.

LeRoy and Vicky Jons' 16 acres east of Wheatland feel those effects. They grow mixed grass and alfalfa hay on the bulk of the property;

however, LeRoy and Vicky have found more success and happiness in their vegetable and berry venture.

Crop Diversification

The Jons' energy is mainly spent managing their acre of vegetables and mixed berries.

The couple planted several raspberry varieties the summer of 2010. Since then, the garden size and plant selection expanded to 13 varieties of red raspberries, four varieties of black raspberries, two varieties of purple raspberries, two varieties of yellow raspberries, two varieties of black berries, two varieties of goji (wolf) berries, and three varieties of Boysen berry, elder, and aronia berries.

"My interest in berries started first as a child when my cousin and I would spend a lot of time in my aunt's berry patch," notes LeRoy. "This interest developed over the course of a career with the USDA where I worked with people involved in the alternative crops such as small fruits, organic production, and direct markets. Moving to Wheatland provided the opportunity to develop that interest into a small business that the two of us can handle. It also provides an opportunity to share with others who may be interested in doing something similar."



LeRoy Jons can move the high tunnel to cover the crop and extend the harvest season.

Expand the Harvest

LeRoy and Vicky installed a 30-foot by 48-foot moveable high tunnel several years ago. This high tunnel, on tracks, can be moved about 50 feet north and south so different crops can be protected different times of the year.

Having a variety of berries, and with the help of the moveable high tunnel, they can harvest for a longer period of time than many other gardeners. Berry harvest usually runs from mid-July until frost with a delayed frost date under the high tunnel. The variety selection also provides an opportunity to gauge production (to some extent),



Fall production raspberries on the cane.

landowners

INTO BERRY BONANZA



The high tunnel is on tracks and moved north or south to protect different crops at different times of the growing season.

disease resistance, flavor, and hardiness of the various berries. The berry plant root stock has been purchased from a variety of nurseries across the nation.

Water Conservation

LeRoy and Vicky know how precious water is. They are fortunate to be on city water, which provides a reliable source for both the berries and the garden. Everything is irrigated utilizing surface drip technology, which replaced a less efficient watering system. LeRoy has determined drip irrigation conserves as much water as possible and still produces a crop.

Marketing the Produce

The berries and vegetables are sold at the Platte County farmers market and the Triple Crown Cooperative, which is an on-line farmers market serving southeast Wyoming. These marketing venues provide the opportunity to sell their products year-round. The couple has not considered a pick-your-own endeavor due to volume required.

The long-term goals for LeRoy and Vicky's berry production are:

- Help develop the berry market in Wyoming.
- Promote fruit production via education through tours, workshops, and working



Different tastes for different palates

As with all foods, there are those we like and those we don't - goji berries are an acquired taste (no offense LeRoy!) described as being "good for you" as they are high in anti-oxidants and have a "pea-like" flavor.

Aronia berries ("choke" berries) are small and dark purple and look similar to blueberry. Aronia do not have a central pit, taste like choke cherry, and can be used for jellies, syrups, and fermented beverages.





LeRoy and Vicki Jons' berry patch has eight raspberry varieties, two black berry varieties, and several other berry types.

with others to promote niche crops in this area.

- Help develop and expand the local food effort in the Wheatland area and throughout the state.

LeRoy is the part-time horticulturist for the Platte County University of Wyoming Extension office. This allows him to spread the word that small fruits, either for home or commercial production, can be fun, a good way to get exercise, and provide an opportunity to earn extra income.

CHALLENGING HAY CROP

Several years of short irrigation water supplies have made producing a consistent hay crop a challenge for LeRoy and Vicki Jons.

They received about one-third of their total allocation last year – enough to irrigate once but not nearly enough for even a single cutting of hay. Improving the land and irrigation structures would provide a more consistent crop but, without reliable water availability, these investments are not economically viable.

LeRoy and Vicki are considering seeding part of their pasture to improved native grasses, such as intermediate wheat grass, that require less water while still providing quality forage. Available surface water will continue to go to the pasture and, in favorable years, they may produce a nice crop of hay that can be locally sold.

*Fruit and vegetable pests fear **Jeff Edwards**. He is the pesticide training coordinator with University of Wyoming Extension and can be reached at (307) 837-2000 or at jedward4@uwyo.edu.*