

# Shining the Spotlight on Dark Fruits

New research plot at FVCC will test various fruits and berries for their growth and sale potential

BY [MOLLY PRIDDY](#) // MAY 25, 2015 // [NEWS & FEATURES](#)



Julian Cunningham looks over a trial plot of dark fruit planted at Flathead Valley Community College on May 19, 2015. Greg Lindstrom | Flathead Beacon

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It's not unusual to find plants growing in the Flathead Valley Community College campus farm, but a new plot of small, dark fruits represents not only new growth in the land, but in a budding relationship between the college and the county extension office.

Continuing its work trying to help Flathead farmers find ways to increase their bottom lines, the Flathead County Extension office, led by Pat McGlynn, began its trial plot of dark fruits two weeks ago at the FVCC agricultural fields.

It's the first joint venture between the college and the extension office, and McGlynn said she's looking forward to the research she'll be able to do on a non-private farm.

"On-farm research can be a challenge, because people make mistakes," she said.

Those mistakes could be accidentally spraying the wrong chemical on the plants, or watering issues, she said, and while they are a normal part of farming, an experimental plot at the college will allow her to work with farmers like Julian Cunningham and Heather Estrada, who understand research methodology.

Cunningham and Estrada are instructors in the college's Integrated Agriculture and Food Systems program, which is entering its second growing season at FVCC. The farm he and his students and colleagues maintain is organic and under constant scrutiny.

The small, dark fruit project will look into which types of these fruits – Saskatoons, black and red currants, aronias, shrub cherries, haskaps, elderberries and gogi berries – work best with the climate here, and which farmers could grow to expand their seasons and potentially their profits.

Many of the fruits and berries in the study are usually ripe by August and can be turned into value-added products, such as jams and liquor flavorings.

"These varieties have been improved upon, but they're natural stock," McGlynn said.

"These should be a choice of fruit crop when people want to grow cherries but they're not closer to (Flathead) lake."

The fruits are hardy and easy to grow, not requiring much infrastructure in the form of irrigation or wiring to hold the plants up, and the produce fruit within two to three years.

"Somebody could grow these in their backyard and make their own juice," she said.

The health benefits are also important to consider. Anthocyanins like these plants produce low-sugar fruits that are high in antioxidants, which can combat cardiovascular disease and many types of cancers.

“I’ve been so excited about these because of the health benefits,” McGlynn said.

There’s a symbiotic relationship between the plot and the school, Cunningham said, because not only will the students learn about proper research practices, but the FVCC culinary program has also voiced interest in using the fruits grown there.

“We are a community college, and a purpose we can serve in the community is to try things that have merit,” Cunningham said.

The research plot contains nine beds of fruit, planted randomly, taking up about one-fifth of an acre. McGlynn said the plants won’t be allowed to grow fruit this summer to focus on whole plant growth, but should be providing fruit in the next couple of years.

There are also plots in Bozeman, Helena, and Corvallis, allowing the research team to compare the data and figure out which fruit works the best in each location.

At FVCC, the plot will provide data and fruit, but also the opportunity to educate, which McGlynn and Cunningham said is one of their biggest, shared goals.

“We will be using it for educational workshops and training,” McGlynn said.

## **Flathead Beacon**