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# **A**n Introduction To Growing Saskatoons

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*“On the great Plains there is a shrub bearing a very sweet berry of a dark blue color, much sought after, great quantities are dried by the Natives; in this state, these berries are as sweet as the best currants, and as much as possible mixed to make Pemmecon; the wood of this shrub, or willow, is hard, weighty and flexible, but not elastic, and wherever it can be procured always forms the Arrow of the Indian, the native name is Mis-sars-cut; to which mee-nar is added for the berry; we call it by the native name, but the french who murder every foreign word call the Berry, Poires, and Pim-me-carn; Peemittegar. I have dwelt on the above, as it [is] the staple food of all persons, and affords the most nourishment in the least space and weight ...”*

David Thompson’s Narrative  
1784-1812; entry  
from June 22, 1810

The saskatoon has long been a treasured wild fruit and a prairie tradition,

being an abundant, staple fruit for prairie peoples for centuries. Although often compared to the blueberry in terms of its size, texture and flavour, the saskatoon is dissimilar to the blueberry and is much more closely related to the apple, mountain ash and hawthorn (members of the Rose family). The edible, sweet fruit have a distinctive flavour with subtle almond overtones. The fruit is not actually a berry but in essence, a tiny apple.

The horticultural potential of the saskatoon has long been recognized. In his various references to the saskatoon, the explorer David Thompson suggested that this fruit ought to be cultivated in Canada and England. The saskatoon was first cultivated in the Peace River area of northern Alberta by W. D. Albright in 1918. The first professor of horticulture at the University of Saskatchewan, C.F. Patterson, wrote about cultivating the saskatoon in 1936.

The saskatoon is a hardy and tolerant fruit species. It is resistant to low temperatures and drought, and grows in a wide range of soil types. It has the capacity to be productive for many years. In addition to its value as a fruit, the saskatoon also has value as an ornamental. Masses of showy flowers appear in the spring, and at least one cultivar produces brilliant fall foliage. Other uses include range restoration, plantings for

birds and other wildlife, windbreaks, and low maintenance, or native plant landscaping.

The saskatoon has not been domesticated, that is, has not undergone breeding and selection for cultivated environments. However, a number of selections having superior characteristics have been chosen from the wild, and it is this material which is being propagated and cultivated. This native fruit species is gaining importance as a commercial fruit crop on the prairies. Relatively small orchards or plantations of such fruit species can produce high yields and profits. Interest in cultivating the saskatoon has grown, in part, because of inconsistent wild crops and the loss of many wild plants. As well, the short, dry growing season and harsh winters typical of the prairie climate are not conducive to the commercial production of typical domesticated fruit crops such as the apple, or peach.

The cultivation of native fruit species, including the saskatoon, could significantly contribute to the diversification and health of the prairie agricultural economy by enhancing alternative agricultural production, by promoting the development of mixed farming operations, by providing a more substantive base for a processing industry, and by enhancing our connections with native prairie ecosystems through the use of native plant species.

Cultivating native fruit species like the saskatoon as fruit crops will help relieve the pressures of large-scale harvesting from wild populations. A renewed interest in our native fruit species may be critical to their

long-term preservation. The initial clearing and landbreaking for prairie agriculture, urban expansion, cattle grazing, lack of prairie fire, the use of herbicides, deforestation, and the clearing of marginal land for agricultural purposes have contributed to the loss of genetic diversity in many native fruit species, including the saskatoon. Fortunately, many farms on the prairies harbor varieties of native fruit species that have been selected from local wild germplasm. Prairie rural gardens represent an excellent way of maintaining grassroots interest in the preservation of genetic diversity and patches of natural ecosystems.

## **Getting Started - Advice For Novice Saskatoon Orchardists**

It has become apparent over the years that some initial advice for the novice orchardist or the potential grower of saskatoons would be useful. One might summarize this advice as follows: start small, do your homework, get your hands dirty, make mistakes, learn, and enjoy the process.

Potential growers of saskatoons and especially novice orchardists must obtain as much information as possible before they begin. The management of any fruit orchard is a complex and demanding job and those not familiar with the activities required to manage an orchard effectively are well-advised to learn as much as they can. This manual is a good starting point.

It is important for potential growers of saskatoons, and novice orchardists to start

small and gain the experience necessary to manage a larger operation. A two hectare orchard demands a considerable amount of management which may overwhelm the beginner with no prior experience. Also, mistakes, or wrong approaches to management can be very costly, especially if a grower's initial investment was large.

Even if a grower has a considerable amount of experience, it's important to note that a 15 hectare orchard is a large orchard that will require a large investment of time, labour and money to manage economically. Prior to establishing orchards larger than 0.5 hectares in size, potential growers are advised to have a sound business plan developed. This plan should include specific details of the operations required for orchard management and marketing of the fruit.

Little scientific research has been done on many aspects of the culture and management of saskatoons. Consequently, this publication can only serve as a guide. All actions taken which are based on the information presented in this publication are solely the responsibilities of the readers or users, and the author is not liable for any direct, indirect, incidental, or consequential damages in connection with or arising from the furnishing, performance, or use of this material. Comments on information contained in this publication are welcomed.

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