

Blackberries: the saga of the berry industry

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By GRACE DITTER, Sublimity



PHILLIP STEFFES, Sublimity farmer who died in 1966, was one of the major contributors to the flourishing Thornless Evergreen Blackberries found in abundance in our area.

THE APPEARANCE of the thornless form has made the Thornless blackberry important in the small fruit industry of Oregon. However, just when and how this form was discovered has not been made known.

Thornless plants were obtained by George M. Darrow about 1931 and planted on the Oregon Experiment Station at Corvallis.

When Waldo followed Dr. Darrow in the U.S.D.A. in small fruit investigations at Corvallis in 1932, he was informed that the plants came from Phillip Steffes of Sublimity, Oregon.

Recent correspondence with Mrs. Ida Steffes, widow of Phillip Steffes, has given us information that has not been previously known.

She writes that about the summer of 1926 Frank Siegmund found a thornless plant of the Evergreen on his farm along a fence east of Stayton. He later told Phillip Steffes about his find, and offered him plants since he, being a grain

farmer, had no interest in them.

Mr. Steffes took the plants and set them out on his farm in Sublimity and began increasing the size of his planting. In time some of the neighbors also started growing the Thornless Evergreen.

As knowledge of the Thornless became better known and the advantages became evident, many growers became concerned as to it being as productive as the thorny form. But by 1938 no indications of less productivity appeared and recommendations that Thornless Evergreen be grown commercially, instead of the thorny form, were made by the agricultural advisers.

FROM THAT TIME to the present the acreage of Thornless Evergreen has increased rapidly in Oregon so that now it is a major horticultural crop in Oregon.

The plantings are long lived and not subject to serious disease or insect pests that cannot be easily controlled. Yields of 9-12 tons per acre are not uncommon.

In recent years machines have been developed that make possible efficient and rapid harvesting of the crop. It is estimated that about 65 per cent of the crop is now-harvested by machines.

Processors of fruit in Oregon have a ready market for the berries in all parts of the United States. Thus, it has become the chief blackberry of commerce. About 70 per cent of the fruit is used in jelly manufacture and about 30 per cent for bakery use in pies.

There are about 3,000 acres of the Thornless Evergreen in Oregon, producing about 24 million pounds at a value of six million dollars.

Because of the importance of this berry the credit for its survival must be given to the man who first recognized its value. Mr Phillip Steffes of Sublimity.

Steffes was born July 20, 1889 and was a farmer all his life in the Sublimity area. He died in 1966.

AS A FARMER he experienced many of the problems of present day growers of low prices and other discouraging circumstances, said his widow who still survives, now 84 years old.

A great industry and a valuable addition to our food supply is due to the insight of this average farmer, who saw the need for a berry such as this and yet never realized how important his efforts in getting it started were going to be.

Mrs. Ida Steffes lives on Broadway St., Sublimity, and son Raymond, who formerly farmed with his father lives in Salem.