

Blueberry blues in Burlington County

Berry business is shifting away from its roots in New Jersey

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PEMBERTON TOWNSHIP — In the cradle of the blueberry industry, the turnover is complete.

It was here in 1916 that Elizabeth White and Frederick V. Coville tamed wild blueberries and made them commercially viable. Twelve years later, Tru-Blu Cooperative was formed.

In the cooperative, farmers shared resources to buy supplies and sell their crops. The cooperative, one of the earliest means of getting the berries to grocery stores, took one of its final steps in disbanding last week.

Fred Detrick was a young teacher in the late 1940s when he heard that by growing blueberries, he could make \$1,000 — about \$7,800 in today's money — per acre each year.

"We used to call it blue gold," said Detrick, now 83, still growing blueberries and in charge of shutting down Tru-Blu.

Today, the small growers who run most of the blueberry farms in Burlington County are finding the business less gold and more, well, blue.

As the monthlong picking season began, the cooperative completed the sale on its office and distribution center to the township school board. It had already ceased operations, sold its trademarked name and figured out what to do with its archives and memorabilia.

Even before Tru-Blu's board decided to break up last year, the area 30 miles east of Philadelphia was losing its prominence in the blueberry world.

The cooperative formed to help growers sell blueberries outside this section of Burlington County, where pine trees are gnarled and the soil is sandy.

By the late 1960s, there were some 360 members of the cooperative, which ran a distribution center and marketed the berries.

During the last 30 years, the center of New Jersey's blueberry trade has shifted to Atlantic County. Though the Atlantic County agriculture hub of Hammonton is only about 25 miles from Pemberton, the industry is a lot different.

In Atlantic County, farms are far larger — an average of 100 acres each, compared with less than 20 acres each in Burlington County.

In 2002, there were 79 farms in Burlington County and 59 in Atlantic, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. But Atlantic had 4 1/2 times as many acres of blueberries.

Last year, New Jersey produced 39 million pounds of cultivated blueberries, second in the nation, but only half as much as Michigan. Nationwide, growers produced 227 million pounds of the fragile berries.

Like with most crops, many small blueberry farms have found it hard to keep going.

"People grow up and kids don't want to do it. People get old," said Candy Bevilaqua, who runs North Branch Blueberries in Pemberton.



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Fred Detrick picks blueberries on his Fred + III blueberry Farm in Pemberton Township.

Detrick, who has two farms totaling 34 acres, said there are several reasons for the blueberry blues in Burlington County. One is the rise of cranberries. That industry also has a hub in the same area, and farmers have been choosing building bogs over planting bushes.

Like with most crops, the encroaching suburbs make it harder to practice agriculture. Some farmers sell their land to developers.