

MARKETING MAYHAWS

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The demand for mayhaws in my area is very good. The reason is, mayhaws grow wild in all the surrounding areas and people have gathered them for years to make jelly. But continued development of public and private lands has restricted access to many wild trees. And improved drainage of these areas has increased competition resulting in overgrowth. Consequently, competition and overgrowth have reduced sunlight levels for mayhaw trees in the wild restricting their ability to set fruit. This series of events has led to a shortage of wild berries, but has increased interest in mayhaw farms.

Mayhaw farms make berries readily available to the public. Most people would rather pay for the berries at a farm than have to work their way through mud, water and thickets. Lots of people still try, but come up short handed, then come to my farm. Many times, I'm told by customers that they will never go back to the wild again in search of mayhaws. It's just too convenient to drive up to the farm and purchase them.

From our experience, growing good berries is a necessity to promote farm-raised mayhaws. Our business has grown each year because of this. People are becoming comfortable with the idea of buying farm-raised mayhaws, but it has been slow as the vast majority of people do not know about them. We anticipate a continuation of this rate, but expect the market to expand. This has a lot to do with the customers themselves.

We take verbal surveys all the time. What we hear most is that when customers make jelly, they give a lot of it to friends and relatives. Some is shipped all over the world. People who have never heard of mayhaw jelly then become regular customers.

Our juice sales are starting to catch up with our sale of berries. It did not start out that way, however. When we started our business, we sold 100 gallons of berries to one gallon of juice. The reason for the difference, we determined, was the public's wary outlook on juice quality. The variability in quality of juice on the open market made people skeptical to buy our juice, resulting in low juice sales. So we set out to make a high quality juice. Some people were a little reluctant to try it, but the positive feedback has been excellent. Now our sale of juice almost matches our sale of berries.

Yes, we still have those that prefer their own juice to ours, but if the customer can skip the rendering of the berries, a major step is taken out of the process. I think the juice will eventually be the biggest seller. Again, for anyone who is going into the mayhaw juice business, keep the quality at high standards.

On our farm we practice the same method for juice extraction to have a consistent product, but variability can exist in juice color depending on the shade of the berry skins and the time of the

season they are harvested. Mayhaws come in many skin colors of red, even yellow, but people prefer a dark-colored juice. At the first of the season when berries are just starting to ripen and there is a higher shade of green in the fruit, juice will be more light-colored. As the season progresses, the berries will become much redder making a darker-colored juice. To address these differences, we blend the berries for consistency. We have mayhaws that are very red, almost burgundy, that are used to blend juice batches to produce just the right color.

We still have a long ways to go in developing the mayhaw market, but the potential is tremendous. Producing good products that people talk about in a positive manner is a key factor.