

Mayhaws becoming big business

By Rita LeBlou
riebleu@americanpress.com

Mayhaw berries are moving out of the swamp and beyond the jelly jar. Johnny Smith, president of the Louisiana Mayhaw Association never dreamed there would be the market for mayhaw berries there is today. "Growers throughout the southeast are putting in orchards. There are companies who want mayhaw berries to flavor vodka, wine, beer, marinade and even ice cream. The unique flavor of mayhaw berries is slowly being discovered throughout the country and other parts of the world," he said.

Even state government is taking an interest, which Johnny said is largely due to the lobbying efforts of Ted Williams, Southwest La. Mayhaw Association District Board Member.

District 30 Senator John R. Smith (of no relation to Johnny) authored a bill during the recent legislative session to make the mayhaw the state's official fruit tree beginning in August.

When Johnny was a boy growing up in Singer, he knew all about mayhaw berries and the distinctive jelly it produced. He and his parents trekked into the Sabine River swamp near their home to dip-net and shake-down berries every spring to put up a few jars of jelly. The process of gathering mayhaws in the wild can be labor intensive.

"We'd put an old sheet under the tree and shake it or dip-net the berries off the water. We hoped for a wet spring so the berries would wind up in the baygall, which made them a little easier to get. When I was little, I thought that someone had been in the swamp ahead of us because the berries were already spread out all over the ground. I would wonder how they

got in and out of there without leaving any footprints. Now I know that nobody had beat us to the mayhaws. Those trees were just more susceptible to 'shattering.'"

Shattering is the term mayhaw experts use to describe wind-blown fruit. Johnny operates J & D Nursery with his wife, Debbie. Part of the enterprise involves grafting and pollinating mayhaw varieties in an effort to produce hybrids that, among other things, shatter less. Size, taste, yield, disease resistance and color are other considerations for growers now that the mayhaw has moved from the woods to the orchard. Ornamental varieties are also being studied and developed. Demand for the plants exceeds Johnny's supply.

One of the varieties used most by Johnny for grafting and cross-pollination is from a tree discovered in 1992 by James Eaves in the woods of North Bearhead. Eaves pulled it up and planted it at his home in Merryville.

(For readers not familiar with the creek names as geographic designations, Johnny explains: "Bearhead is a creek running about two miles west of Singer. When it crosses Hwy. 12, it's called Houston River, but it's still the same stream. Several small streams form its "head" in the large, mainly uninhabited area between Singer, Merryville and DeRidder. The small backwoods community southwest of Singer is called Bearhead.")

Eaves and his wife, Maxine, had a mayhaw juice and jelly-making sideline. When the tree he found established itself and began to produce,

Eaves noticed it was a late bloomer, the berries were large and the tree was resistant to blight. Late blooming is an important quality because early producing trees are often hit by frost.

"I called Billy Craft, a wildlife biologist for the state and Bobby Talbert from the Mayhaw Association to have a look. Craft came back to Eaves' orchard the next year when the tree was blooming to collect pollen and take cuttings.

Eaves was happy to oblige him and asked only one thing in return. When a tree is found to have better-than-average qualities, it is usually named by the person growing the tree and is thereafter referred to as a selection. Eaves asked the men to name cuttings from his tree after his wife, Maxine, who died in 2004.

Now, rather than a single tree in his orchard that reminds him of his wife, the "Maxine" has been planted in orchards throughout the southeast United States and Eaves has been able to tell others how the tree got its name. It is also first or second on the list of top producers, depending on who you ask.

Craft, 72, has been studying mayhaw hybrids since 1988 after he realized that local nurseries didn't offer varieties that produced well. "It's been a long difficult road. Some of the hybrids are no better than the parents.

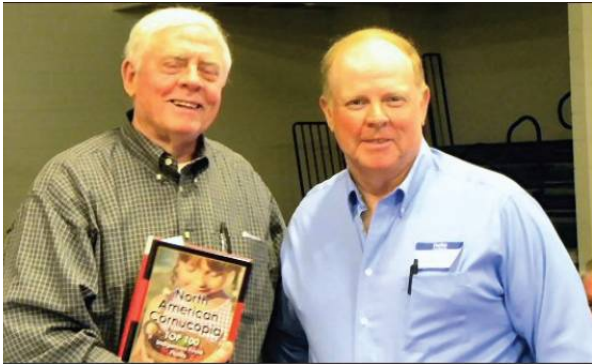
Some are worse. It takes seven years to know what you've got," he said.

Out of 550 trees he's developed and studied, he lists four as outstanding. The Red Champ is first on his list. It's a cross between the Maxine and the Double G, his fourth pick. Maxine is number two and the Surprise is number three. The Surprise didn't look like much at first, according to Craft. "It was the runt of the bunch."

Johnny will be continuing Craft's mayhaw hybridization work.

Interested in growing your own mayhaws? Here are a few basics to help you get started.

- Mayhaws like wet soil that drains well with a Ph. of around 6.5.
- Trees are self-pollinating, but according to Johnny, pairs seem to produce better than single trees.
- Trees should be planted about 25 feet apart.
- Prien Pines Nursery, Lake Charles, has a few of the Maxine variety left. Trees can be planted any time, but planting them at this time of the year will require regular watering.
- For more information about planning, putting in and maintaining a mayhaw orchard, go to www.mayhaw.org.



Special to the American Press

Left: Billy Craft and Bobby Talbert are considered to be two of the pioneers of the Louisiana Mayhaw Association. Right: Berries of the Maxine variety, the fruit of the labor of Johnny and Debbie Smith.