

## **SLOW MONEY Maine**

**Machias, Maine**

**October 10, 2018**

**Presenting: *Theresa Gaffney, Highland Blueberry Farm and Highland Organics***

First, I would like to start by saying, “I am not here today to solicit funds”. Rather, I am here to share with you my story about Wild Maine Blueberries. I grew up on a family farm, near a mill town community on the coast. It truly was a right of passage to rake the wild blueberries in the summer as a kid growing up in Maine. However, I must confess, I wasn’t all that good at raking, so never in a million years did I ever think that after serving in the Coast Guard, having 3 children and raising them as a single mom for many years, that I would go on to grow wild blueberries for a living, but here I am after 20 years of farming, and I am loving what I get to do.

In 1999 when Tom and I married, I came into the relationship with 3 kids and he came with 2 sons. Together, we made a modern day “Brady Bunch” of 7 in one home! Fortunately, Tom came to the blending of our families with a home in Stockton Springs, on a 100 acre parcel of land, that included blueberry fields. That same year, we decided to manage our 25 acres of wild blueberries as a family owned and operated business. My parents joined us in the operation while we transitioned to organic. In 2002, we were certified by MOFGA.

With a small fresh pack line from Zane Emerson, we began building our wholesale market and sold to over 350 customers who would visit our farm to buy fresh & frozen wild blueberries. Bonnie was one of our customers back then, as I was one of hers, when she grew Strawberries.

My Father built a processing building where we worked with youth to clean, sort, and pack wild blueberries. Though we no longer process our own fruit in this building, I do have the privilege of now working with 3 Ladies to make our value added products that we sell at our farm store, in retail stores and online.

In 2004, my dear friend, Dr. Kristi Crowe-White, then doctoral student at the University of Maine, mentioned to me that she needed a project for her Chemistry students at a local high school. I shared with her my curiosity about wild blueberry leaves. We knew that the fruit of the wild Maine blueberry plant was high in antioxidants, but what about the leaves, when they turned a crimson red in the fall? Did they have any value?

I had learned that the local Indians would use the fruit, leaves & roots of the wild blueberries for various health issues. Dr. Crowe-White reviewed the archives and found that no research on wild blueberry leaves had ever been done. Certain nothing would come from the project, she thought overall it would be a good opportunity for the students. What they learned from the research, was that the organic wild Maine blueberry leaves had more anthocyanins, or antioxidants, than the wild blueberry fruit!

After confirming the students results at the University Lab, Dr. Crowe-White encouraged me to do something with this discovery. So together, we applied and were awarded 3 Maine Technology Institute, Seed Grants for the Research & Development of the first-ever, Organic Whole Plant Wild Maine Blueberry Tea, which we now call ‘Sipping Blue’. This tea is made with just the fruit and the leaves of the wild Maine blueberry plant. This “first of its kind” Tea, or tisane, had many successes, and some successful failures, all of it has brought us to where we are today!

I must stop here in the story to tell you that between 2004 to 2014, NO ONE talked about, or harvested, this waste by-product of the industry. When I would talk to folks in the blueberry world about harvesting leaves, on more than one occasion, I received some strange looks. One person even said to me, “You do know that it’s about the fruit, don’t you?” Well, yes I did know it was about the fruit, but I also believed there was so much more.

In 2016, I focused my 4th MTI Seed Grant on the Wild Blueberry Leaves. This project allowed me the opportunity to work with Katy Green & Heather Omand from MOFGA, 6 organic wild Maine blueberry growers and a collaborator from Spain whose company, Nektium, was making a nutraceutical grade product from blueberry leaves. Jorge Velázquez helped us to establish

testing parameters and upon his review of our results, concluded that our leaves satisfied their specifications for “a raw material”.

We also evaluated the viability of a secondary harvest of Wild Maine Blueberry Leaves for the small organic grower. MOFGA shared the Enterprise Budgets that Heather Omand constructed from the data that was gathered in the project, which they posted to their website, so others could learn from us. The farmers were encouraged to utilize what they had learned to develop their own products and create markets for their Leaves.

Our farm alone, sold almost 100 pounds of our Wild Blueberry Leaves as a loose tea or in tea bags to our customers from the 2017 harvest, selling out in June of this year. Customers were delighted when our harvest began again this fall and our product was available to buy. Today, we offer over 20 different products using the Wild Maine Blueberries & Leaves, grown organically from our farm.

Another successful product we created, which is also the first of its kind, is our very popular Blueberry Barque Chips. This product is made with 100% organic wild Maine blueberry fruit which is enjoyed as a crunchy blueberry treat, topped on ice cream or summer salads. We also use the Dehydrated Wild Blueberries to make cold drinks, Sprinkles and our very popular, Wild Blueberry Powder for smoothies. Our products have become a global hit through our online store.

Our hope is to someday have a state of the art processing facility, large enough to serve other organic blueberry farmers, that could include cleaning, freezing and storing harvested fruit; a much larger dehydration system for the fruit; a built to scale drying system in a dedicated room for the leaves; and production, packaging and shipping lines for the products we, along with other small growers, will offer an expanding market.

Well that wraps up my story for now. Tom & I would like to thank-you for this opportunity to share our exciting journey with you! We did bring some of our most popular products with us to share with you after a Q&A time.