Gulf Coast Fruit Study Newsletter

Volume 26, Issue 3

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Next Gulf Coast Fruit Study Meeting

Our upcoming meeting is at **7:00 PM** on **Thursday**, **August 30**, with a review of 2012 NAFEX and SFF meetings and our annual pear tasting.

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August 30, 2012 Meeting

Origins of The Gulf Coast Fruit Study Group

This meeting marks the 25th anniversary of the Gulf Coast Fruit Study Group (GCFSG), establishing it as one of the longest active organizations of this type in our area. The concept of such a study group was developed by Bill Adams, then the Chief Bear Creek Extension Service Agent and frequent newspaper columnist on horticultural issues, and Dr. Leon Atlas, who had developed a multi-session course in fruit tree culture at the Houston Arboretum and was an early member of other successful fruit study groups including California Rare Fruit Growers, Southern Fruit Fellowship and North American Fruit Explorers, as well as Ted Teddlie, who had taken a master gardener course and thought a local group dedicated to fruits and berry study would have great merit. The suggested name of the organization was **The Fruit**, **Nut and Berry** Group and began with 40 Charter members. Dr. Atlas had occasionally sold fruit trees, at cost, that he had obtained from plant nursery contacts he had in California to students of his Arboretum classes. He convinced his friends, Heidi Sheesley and Bill Rhode, who were then organizing Tree Search Farms Nursery, to obtain, propagate and sell fruit trees to the public that would be successful in the Gulf Coast Area. A plan was developed for an experimental orchard located at the Bear Creek site and served as a demonstration and testing site. The process began of ordering appropriate rootstocks and seeking unique and promising cultivars for the area.

Our quarterly meetings featured speakers from the Texas A&M University as well as professional growers and highly skilled amateurs. We had programs on grafting, propagation, soil management and often featured individual fruits previously not widely grown here, such as jujubes and pomegranates and Asian persimmons, as well as blueberries. Herb Durand, a skilled amateur blueberry hybridizer, spoke at one of our meetings and had to contend with a screaming infant in the front row.

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Origins of the Gulf Coast Fruit Study Group (continued)

Many other volunteers helped to make the project successful. Yvonne Gibbs worked in the trial orchard and later assumed the duties of typing and editing a newsletter for the group. Ted Teddlie initiated the newsletter, writing it in longhand for three years. Ted established a membership list, requesting \$2 from each member to pay for coffee and cookies. Stephanie Gephardt, the Extension office horticultural services secretary, had the messy job of printing out the early GCFSG newsletters on the mimeograph machine. Eventually, Yvonne converted the newsletter to a computer format making it appear more professional. Tom Leroy joined the Extension Service staff and with Bill Adams, wrote their classic book, Growing Fruits and Nuts for the South, based in part on their experience with the experimental orchard. Bill and Tom also are credited with performing some effective plant breeding projects, and their pear seedlings, developed as cross of the blight resistant and low-chill **Tennessee** pear with the high quality but blight sensitive Housi pear, led to two excellent uniquely Houston pears named Tennosui and Southern King that will be featured at our upcoming meeting. One of Dr. Atlas' best grafting students, George McAfee, scouted the area for other promising cultivars and discovered a large, excellent quality pear in north Houston we named Acres Home. George has mastered the technique of grafting multi-colored crape myrtles on the same tree, and you may see his work in some of our local parks. Through our promotion of fruiting plants for the Houston area, the original yearly sale of 10-20 trees by Dr. Atlas from his backyard has increased into the sales of thousands of fruiting plants each spring at several Extension Service facilities and by the Urban Harvest organization.

We soon began two yearly fruit tree tours or excursions – initially on non-air conditioned school buses, and eventually on the smaller but more modern air conditioned buses which could be reserved at no cost to us through the County services. With the availability of these vehicles we were able to go greater distances in more comfort and visited peach orchards to the north, a winery to the south and olive orchards in Wimberly, Texas, among our tours. We became high tech and our newsletter was initially placed on a website by the-then Bear Creek Extension Agent, Carol Brouwer, along with archived copies of all earlier editions. More recently the website has been updated by Clayton Bell and may be found at www.gcfsg.weebly.com The carousel projector slide show at our meetings has given way to the power point presentations we currently employ. They are open to the public at no charge and, we frequently give away difficult-to-find plants as door prizes to those who attend. When available, we have a fruit tasting of material This particular August 30th meeting features pears, and at our last grown in our area. meeting, we had a variety of figs to taste. Sign-in time for the programs is at 6:30 PM, and they begin at 7 PM and end at 8:30 PM. Coffee and dessert is complimentary.

NAFEX 2012 Annual Meeting

The 2012, North American Fruit Explorers (Nafex) annual meeting was held at the University of Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon, Canada, and featured lectures, field tasting, and tours concerning cultivation of Haskap. The meeting was held in conjunction with the Canadian Society of Agronomy, the Canadian Society for Horticultural Science and the Agricultural Institute of Canada and was heavily attended. The impressive campus of this University features many beautiful American Elm trees, untouched by blight, and a number of inquisitive magpies seeking a snack. It also features a complex system of underground tunnels connecting all campus buildings, so one does not suffer frostbite on the way to classes in the winter. You can also pass through security at the Saskatoon airport in minutes without removing your shoes.

Haskap is a berry in the honeysuckle family which originated in Southern China and now has pockets of growth and cultivation expressing quite diverse acquired genetic features in Japan, Canada and Russia. The plant tolerates bitter cold temperatures and produces its crop from first leaf appearance to mature fruit in only 2 months time. This is important in the prairies of Canada, where most agriculture involves grain crops, and the growing season is short. The Haskap plants are easily kept at 4-6 feet in height, and the crop may be mechanically harvested. Haskap also does not mind the wet heavy clay soils in this area and attracts few pests. The berry is about the same color as a blueberry but is generally larger and elongated. The flavor may be indistinguishable from the blueberry or slightly spicy, but may be entirely insipid, depending upon the cultivar. The plants generally require pollination, although there is some parthenocarpy. Like blueberries, the fruit contains multiple anti-oxidants, and has high food value, and can be eaten out of hand or processed. Breeding programs at the University seek to increase berry size, yield per bush, and uniformity of shape and quality. The berries vary in the strength of their attachment to the plant when ripe, and cultivars are also under selection for their ability to be mechanically harvested without damaging the fruit. This characteristic would help to allow them to be packaged for fresh consumption, like blueberries. There seems no doubt that the Haskap will become a premier crop and a new industry for Canada.

Bob Borrs, a Saskatchewan University Professor of Horticulture, and his staff, organized our lectures and our tours, and this led to a very educational meeting. Maxine Thompson, an emeritus Professor of Horticulture who began the research in the United States on Haskap by collecting plant samples from Japan and Russia, and continues to work on crosses in her screened-in backyard, also attended as a guest of Nafex, and made a presentation. Thank to advances in modern plant genetics, the changes in traits of the Haskap as the plant migrated and acclimated to new locations and set up shop can be mapped. With current breeding techniques, now segregated traits can again be re-united seeking to maximize desirable qualities.



Haskap Berries

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Experimental Haskap Orchard