

Harvest rules

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'Se compra bolita'

The low-growing, spiky plants are found throughout Florida, though their range extends west to Texas and north to South Carolina. They are ancient, capable of living for 10,000 years, botanists have found.

"There's no doubt the wild ones are quite old. They're part of Florida," said Richard Moyroud, chairman of Florida's Endangered Species Council.

The berries are harvested between August and October, a time when there's no citrus, tomatoes, grapes or much of anything else to harvest in the state.

They have an unpleasant, bitter taste, akin to "rotten cheese steeped in tobacco juice," according to Jonathan Dickinson, a merchant shipwrecked on Jupiter Island in the 1690s.

But it's not their taste that drives the market.

It's the oil that saturates the fruit as it ripens and quadruples in size. The berries are ideal when they are plump and black, but the splotchy golden ones are just as prized. When they are green, they won't have enough oil to make extraction worthwhile.

Harvesting is hard work.

"Those bushes are prone to being a good home for wasps. You've got spiders. You've got rattlesnakes that like the dense cover. And the bushes themselves are very sharp," said Alan Shelby, vice president of the Florida Forestry Association, which represents forest landowners

hand can be dangerous. A Palm Bay buyer was found dead Sept. 10 of a gunshot wound.

Buyers don't need permits of their own, but must copy the permits and permission letters of everyone who drops berries off in exchange for cash.

Juanita Almanza buys berries behind her taco restaurant. A sign on the roadway reads, "Se compra bol-ita," which translated from Spanish means, "We buy berries."

"This is one of those years where it's been a light crop," Almanza said. "In a way, it's good this law came when it did. Because there's not a lot of berries."

She said she turns people away often for not having the proper documentation.

"It's not worth the fine, believe me," she said.

Spreading the word

The Endangered Plant Advisory Council met Feb. 21 in Gainesville to discuss saw palmetto at the behest of law enforcement and the Florida Forestry Association, according to Moyroud.

The council unanimously voted to recommend the saw palmetto be listed as commercially exploited, and the Department of Agriculture added it to the list July 17.

"The harvest, we have been told by wildlife officials, may actually impact the survival of native animals," Moyroud said.

Birds, raccoons, gopher tortoises, bears and other creatures rely on the berries.

By mid-September, more than 1,100 permits had been issued out

And then it has to be approved."

Cracking down

At least 85 people have been arrested on the Treasure and Space coasts for illegally harvesting the berries, a misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail.

As of Sept. 26, court records showed 47 arrests in Brevard County, 22 arrests in St. Lucie County and eight arrests each in Indian River and Martin counties.

While some were found in the act of berry-picking or trespassing, many were caught during traffic stops or parked along the road.

Giving law enforcement the ability to catch illegal harvesters in the act was at the heart of the rule change.

"If we were to get a call from a landowner and we didn't catch them in the act, there's nothing we could do — even if they had berries," said Tod Goodyear, spokesman for the Brevard County Sheriff's Office. "You had to actually catch them trespassing."

Now, a paper trail follows the berries until they arrive at processing plants.

Cash crop

The berries are a commodity, with a price that steadily climbs throughout the season but is prone to sudden leaps or crashes.

At the beginning of August, buyers were paying \$1 per pound. Throughout September, the price hovered near \$4, reaching a peak of \$4.75, Baker said.

"The demand has increased big-time over the last five years," Baker said. "In the '90s they bought 'em for 10 cents."