

## Blueberries Built for Export, Consistency and Premium Programs

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As global blueberry markets become more demanding, tightening retail specifications, extending supply chains, and grappling with labour constraints, varietal innovation is emerging as a critical lever for grower profitability and supply-chain resilience. Fall Creek Farm & Nursery, a global leader in blueberry genetics, continues to strengthen its premium Sekoya portfolio with the introduction of Sekoya Nova FC15-173, a high-chill, mid-late season variety developed to address some of the most persistent production and postharvest challenges in the category.

In this interview with NUFFOODS Spectrum, Mark David, Vice President & General Manager, SEKOYA, Fall Creek Farm & Nursery, shares insights into the production advantages of Sekoya Nova, its role in improving harvest efficiency and shelf life, and how it fits into Fall Creek's broader strategy to deliver a consistent, year-round premium blueberry supply for global fresh markets.

**What specific production challenges in mid-late season blueberry cultivation does Sekoya Nova FC15-173 aim to solve, and how does it differ from existing high-chill varieties?**

Mid-late season blueberry production often presents challenges in maintaining fruit size, firmness, and harvest efficiency during a time when labour availability tightens and quality variability increases.

Sekoya® Nova 'FC15-173' was specifically developed to address these challenges by offering large, consistent fruit size, concentrated ripening, and extended postharvest performance. In Fall Creek evaluations, this variety consistently exceeds the proportion of large fruit and strong firmness retention compared to many high-chill mid- to late season varieties currently in commercial production. Additionally, it enables growers to build yield quickly once established, resulting in more predictable returns during a traditionally difficult harvest window.

In the latter half of the high-chill production season, competition for labour from other crops increases. The large, uniformly ripe berries of Sekoya® Nova 'FC15-173' can be harvested easily and quickly, benefiting both grower economics and harvest crews. This allows growers to optimise returns while improving overall harvest efficiency.

Rather than introducing a fundamentally different production system, Sekoya® Nova 'FC15-173' is designed to reduce common trade-offs, particularly between size, shelf life, and harvest efficiency, while remaining compatible with established high-chill growing regions.

### **How does the 60-day shelf life impact exporters, retailers, and overall supply chain efficiency?**

A 60-day or longer shelf life offers significant advantages in supply chain flexibility, particularly for export-oriented markets. For exporters, it reduces the risks associated with long transit times, offering greater flexibility in shipping and market timing. For retailers, it ensures consistent quality at the point of sale and helps limit shrink, particularly in premium programs where firmness and flavour are critical for maintaining consumer satisfaction.

In high-chill production, a variety may typically have only a 3-week harvest period, which can lead to supply gaps and limited availability. Sekoya® Nova 'FC15-173', however, offers growers the opportunity to convert a traditionally 3-6 week product into one that can be reliably harvested and stored for 2 months, allowing for a consistent supply over an 8- to 12-week period. This creates a more stable distribution plan, providing retailers and exporters with the ability to plan and stock more predictably.

This mirrors the apple industry, where controlled atmosphere storage has long been used to extend shelf life and ensure a consistent market presence over an extended period.

From a system perspective, the longer shelf life creates buffer capacity across harvest, packing, logistics, and retail handling. Importantly, Fall Creek data confirms that this storability is achieved without compromising eating quality, providing a strong balance between freshness and shelf life. As a result, consumers can enjoy high-quality fruit even after prolonged storage, creating a positive experience throughout the supply chain.

### **With 80 per cent of fruit exceeding 18 mm, how important is this size consistency in meeting global retail specifications?**

Size consistency is crucial for meeting global retail specifications, especially in export markets where pack standards are becoming stricter. In Fall Creek trials, over 80% of Sekoya® Nova 'FC15-173' fruit exceeded 18 mm in diameter, a significantly higher proportion than is commonly reported in comparable high-chill varieties.

Retail specifications are tightening, and fruit that doesn't meet those size minimums will bring lower returns for growers. Varieties like Sekoya® Nova 'FC15-173', which produce a majority of large fruit, help growers maximise returns by reducing the potential for lost revenue due to smaller fruit.

This level of uniformity simplifies grading, improves packout efficiency, and helps exporters meet specification thresholds more consistently across shipments. Moreover, the consistent fruit size ensures reliable market demand, supporting repeat retail programs rather than one-off placements, which are less predictable.

As retail expectations for size minimums become more stringent, growers who invest in varieties that meet these standards can optimise their returns, ensuring they stay competitive in both premium retail programs and international markets.

### **How does the concentrated ripening profile support labour efficiency and harvest planning in regions facing workforce constraints?**

Concentrated ripening allows growers to harvest more fruit in fewer passes, which is increasingly important in regions facing labour constraints or rising labour costs. This enables tighter harvest scheduling, improved labour efficiency, and lower harvest costs.

Fall Creek evaluations highlight harvest efficiency as a defining characteristic of Sekoya® Nova 'FC15-173', driven by both fruit size and ripening concentration. These traits combine to help growers with predictable labour planning during a season when workforce availability can be limited, ultimately maximising labour efficiency and reducing operational costs.

The concentrated ripening profile not only optimises harvest timing but also supports labour resource management, allowing growers to plan more effectively for a consistent workforce. This ensures that labour is utilised efficiently, ultimately reducing per-unit harvest costs and helping growers meet tight labour market demands without sacrificing quality or efficiency.

### **Which geographical markets or production regions hold the strongest commercial potential for this variety?**

Sekoya® Nova 'FC15-173' is ideally suited to high-chill, mid-late season production regions that are targeting premium fresh markets and export programs. North-Central Europe, including Poland, has demonstrated promising early commercial success, with growers noting good plant vigour, adaptation, and consistent fruit size throughout the harvest period.

Additionally, the US and Chile are key targeted regions for expansion, thanks to their established blueberry industries, strong export demand, and favourable growing conditions for high-chill varieties. These regions offer an ideal balance of market demand and optimal growing climates for high-quality production, making them prime candidates for Sekoya® Nova 'FC15-173's commercial growth.

Beyond these regions, Fall Creek recommends region-specific trials, as performance can vary depending on climate, chill accumulation, and management practices.

### **How does Sekoya Nova fit into Fall Creek's broader strategy for year-round premium blueberry supply and future innovation?**

Sekoya® Nova 'FC15-173' completes the mid-late season window within the Sekoya® portfolio, reinforcing Fall Creek's broader strategy of delivering a cohesive, year-round premium blueberry supply rather than focusing on isolated varietal solutions. With Sekoya® Nova 'FC15-173', Fall Creek fills an important gap in its high-chill variety lineup, bridging the harvest window between Sekoya® Grande 'FC13-122' and Sekoya® Fiesta 'FC13-113'. This strategic addition strengthens the seasonal continuity of the Sekoya® portfolio.

The variety reflects Fall Creek's commitment to premium fruit flavour, firmness, shelf life, and size consistency, ensuring that fruit quality is maintained throughout the entire supply chain—from the field to consumers. Sekoya® Nova 'FC15-173' embodies Fall Creek's ongoing efforts to innovate across chill zones, developing genetics that meet the practical demands of global fresh-market distribution while maintaining high-quality standards.

Consistency remains the number one challenge in the blueberry industry today, and Sekoya® Nova 'FC15-173' is one of the varieties that will help achieve consistent, high-quality fruit for consumers every time. This consistency will support grower success and enable the entire blueberry supply chain to thrive, ultimately making healthy, enjoyable blueberries more accessible to consumers around the world.

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