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Wait worth it for patient truffles harvesters

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VICTORIA - It took seven years for Betty and Grant Duckett to harvest their first truffle, but for them it was worth the wait.

The couple retired to Vancouver Island after years of raising livestock on the Prairies. They wanted to grow truffles, so they bought a 40-acre spread near Parksville, levelled the old pasture land, readied the soil, dug wells, and planted more than 5,000 trees inoculated with black Périgord truffle spores, and then waited.

"It was a decision that was hard to make because it was such an investment," Betty says. "We knew it would be years and years of trying. No one in Canada had ever done it, so no one could help us."

Last December, the couple's wait finally came to an end when they harvested Canada's first crop of the black Périgord.

"I used to say they're an 'earthy-nutty-rich-full-aromatic-mystic-secret-masterpiece-of-nature .' They're Canadian black diamonds," Betty says. "They are. When you find one of those after the years you've put into it, it is absolutely heavenly."

The black Périgord truffle is grown in France, Italy and Spain, and can fetch more than \$1,500 a kilogram. Due to a prolonged drought, only 100 tonnes were produced worldwide last year, and the harvest is expected to decline even further if growing conditions remain unfavourable.

The Ducketts' first harvest wasn't huge, but it proved they could do it.

"It was many, many kilograms. We shared with friends and neighbours, and we tried cheeses and sauces and vinegars and honeys and mustards, to get our head around what was possible. There is so much that truffles can do."

The aromatic and pungent truffles are the result of a symbiotic relationship between a tree and the truffle fungus. The fungus collects water to nourish the tree. The tree rewards it with sugar, which it uses to make truffles.

When the Ducketts started planting in 2000, the Truffle Association of B.C., a group dedicated to promoting a commercial truffle industry in B.C., hadn't formed yet. The couple scrounged all the knowledge they could, ordered the hazel and oak trees from France, and faced the import hassles alone.

"We were waiting with bated breath to see if Canada could do it, if our climate could do it, and we've proven that," Betty says.

Truffles must be grown on a patch of ground with a good southern exposure and that gets enough sun in the fall. Truffles require a 7.5 to 7.9 soil pH. Soil in southern B.C. typically has a pH level in the 4.5 to 5.2 range, so lime must be added. Then there's irrigation, the hassle of importing trees inoculated with truffle spores, and the five-to-10-year wait as the fungus

spreads through the roots and forms truffles.

The Ducketts have brought in Lagotto Romagna Italian truffle dogs to sniff out the subterranean delights. Traditionally, pigs have been used to find them, but the Ducketts are wary of that.

"The pigs eat them. You've got to be careful with the pigs," says Betty, laughing. "The best is the dogs. They sniff them and they point, then we do the digging."

Several members of the truffle association have also begun planting in Duncan, Kelowna and elsewhere.

The B.C. Agroforestry Industry Development Initiative is also sponsoring a research farm at the University of British Columbia.

Association treasurer Evelyn Pereira and her husband Jeff recently purchased 400 of the Ducketts' truffle trees for an acre on their farm. The Pereiras retired to Victoria from Prince George, where they, too, raised livestock, and are now experimenting with truffles, echinacea seeds and goji berries.

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