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KALAMAZOO PHOTOS

South Haven firm ramps up blueberry-picking innovation

By [Kris Hitchcock](#)
September 07, 2009, 11:00AM



Mark Bugnaski | Kalamazoo Gazette

Rick McKibben co-owner of BEI International in South Haven, stands right of the prototype blueberry picking machine that uses air pressure to force the berries off the bushes. The machine allow the same freshness and quality as handpicked berries.

SOUTH HAVEN -- There have been only subtle changes to the way blueberries are harvested since H. McKibben patented his picking machine in 1959.

But that might be about to change.

Almost forty years after McKibben sold his manufacturing shop, BEI International, on Kalamazoo Street in South Haven, his grandsons, Jeff and Rick McKibben, partnered with Max Lint and Bill Evashevski to purchase the company and possibly revolutionize machine harvesting of blueberries and other soft fruit.

BEI International

BEI has built blueberry-harvesting machines in South Haven since 1965 in a 25,000-square-foot building on Kalamazoo Street. Before new owners took over in October, it sold an average of 15 harvesting machines per year. It's record since then:

- Sold 85 newly developed centipede-style catching systems.
- Added three full-time employees -- a 15 percent increase.
- Made plans to sell 15 to 20 traditional harvesting machines and 10 to 12 new harvesting machines, called the Black Ice.

KALAMAZOO WEATHER

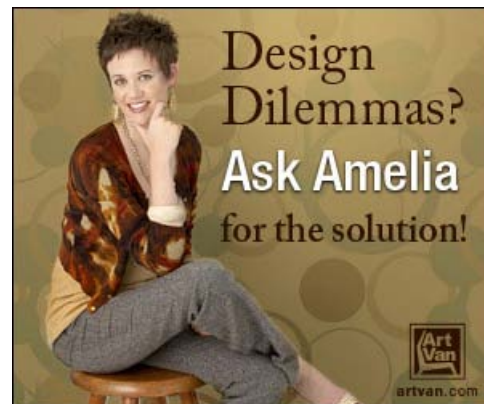
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Senator Carl Levin in Kalamazoo

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BEI has gone from struggling to expanding since October, when the partners purchased the firm for an undisclosed amount. They've increased business domestically and have tapped into the international market. They've added three full-time employees -- or 15 percent more people. There's talk of possibly adding a second shift or moving into a larger facility in South Haven.

"I was very concerned that we would lose BEI, which would be terrible because we are blueberry country," said Jack McCloughan, the city's economic-development liaison. He said that although BEI has added just a few jobs, they are vital to South Haven and its economy.

"Every job matters," he said. "That's another family that has an income away from welfare and unemployment."

Rick McKibben credits the company's recent success in large part to two new technologies developed by his brother and late grandfather. They also recently discovered that BEI's traditional harvesting machine is so far the only machine in the world capable of picking a nut called jatropa, which is used to produce a form of biodiesel.

"We feel very good about where we are at," Rick McKibben said.

Soon after taking over BEI, Jeff McKibben refined and brought to market a new drop-tray technology for catching fruit as it falls off the bushes. The centipede-type tray sits at the bottom of a BEI machine, gently wrapping around the bottom of blueberry bushes and catching the fruit as it falls. Rick McKibben said compared to the company's other tray system, the centipede system prevents 15 to 30 percent fewer fruit from falling onto the ground.

"He's definitely revolutionized the catching system," Rick said of his brother. The company also recently unveiled a new harvesting machine that picks fruit without touching its branches. Built much like the machines now used in the fields, the Black Ice blows air from several side vents at up to 140 miles per hour, forcing ripe berries to fall from the bushes onto a drop tray.

In field tests, the machine has delivered hand-picked-quality berries at machine speed and cost, the McKibbens say.

The difference could mean staggering savings for farmers and possibly consumers. Rick McKibben said it costs farmers 50 cents per pound to hand-pick berries. In comparison, machine-picking costs 5 cents per pound.

Rick McKibben said machine-picked berries are sent to processing plants to be used in foods such as jellies and Pop-Tarts. Hand-picked berries are sent to the fresh market.

In field tests, Rick McKibben said, berries harvested with the Black Ice machine were sometimes more fresh than hand-picked berries because only ripe fruit fell off the bushes. He said field workers pick any berries that are blue -- but not all are ripe and ready to eat.

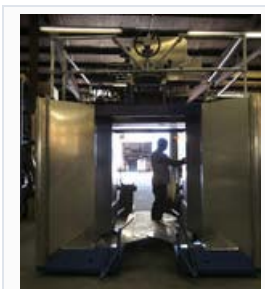
Jeff McKibben said Black Ice also is gentler on blueberry bushes, which helps them produce more fruit.

The product is the result of nearly two decades of development work by Jeff McKibben and his grandfather. H. McKibben saw a prototype of the Black Ice field tested before he died in March 2006.

By The Numbers

Michigan is the No. 1 producer of blueberries in the nation. Last year's crop was the largest-ever, at 110 million pounds.

\$130 million
Value of the blueberry industry in Michigan's economy.



Mark Bugnaski | Kalamazoo Gazette

Jordan Hayes, a mechanic at BEI International in South Haven, works on the prototype blueberry picking machine.

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90 million

Pounds of blueberries Michigan grows on the average.

70 million

Pounds of Michigan blueberries that went to processing plants last year.

40 million

Pounds of Michigan blueberries that went to the fresh market last year.

19,000

Acres in Michigan devoted to the blueberry crop.

80 percent

Van Buren and Allegan counties' share of Michigan's blueberry harvest.

"We discussed it for a long, long time -- touchless picking. We played with different methods," Jeff McKibben said.

The first production machine recently was delivered in Holland. It cost between \$150,000 and \$200,000 -- slightly more than BEI's traditional harvesting machines. Later this month, it will be used to harvest raspberries in Washington and Oregon. Rick McKibben said Black Ice might be the first machine gentle enough to harvest such fruit. BEI also is venturing into nut harvesting. The company's traditional harvesting machine has been field-tested to pick the jatropa. The nut, grown in tropical climates, produces an oil that can be processed into a high-quality biodiesel. If it works, BEI would be the first company to successfully machine-pick the nuts, Rick McKibben said.

"Based on the number of acres, we could be looking at hundreds of machines for jatropa," Rick McKibben said. "Obviously that's being aggressive. It will take a couple years for that business to accept mechanical picking."

McCloughan said BEI's success would mean great things for South Haven, including many spin-off jobs.

"The attitude that's been formed in the last year, it's positive to be able to talk to a company like BEI," he said. "It's exciting to know there's light at the end of the tunnel."

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