

# New research project studies dark fruits

By **RYAN MURRAY**  
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Thanks to a grant from the Montana Department of Agriculture, Flathead residents may get to experience some unusual fruits.

The \$119,000 grant will allow for the growth of small, dark fruits on the Flathead Valley Community College campus.

Pat McGlynn, Montana State University agriculture extension agent for Flathead County, said the fruits could be grown on a half acre and used by local businesses.

"It seems like we add a new one every year," she said. "We have the hop project, the cherries and the grapes."

The agricultural research projects, which have spanned several years, look at the feasibility of growing out-of-area crops in Northwest Montana. These include the hop farm south of Whitefish, which already has ben-

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♦ *Pat McGlynn, MSU agriculture extension agent*

efited local brewers. The other projects McGlynn mentioned, the sweet cherry research project and cold hardy grape project, are all bearing fruit as well.

The fruits promoted in the most recent grant — 23 varieties of fruits such as red and black currants, saskatoons, chokeberries, sour cherries, elderberries, goji berries, yellow raspberries and several other varieties — are small, dark, low in sugar and high in vitamin C.

The fruit maintenance would be largely managed by Flathead Valley Community College Agriculture Program Director Heather Estrada and her staff and could be used in courses at the college.

"It's going to be great for the col-

lege," Estrada said. "I'll be able to use my research background to teach students about scientific methods, collecting data and research protocols."

She said it was likely a graduate student from Montana State University would be collecting the official grant data, but FVCC's agriculture program would be tasked with maintaining the research crops — getting valuable research experience in the process.

The exact layout has yet to be determined, but McGlynn thinks about 12 plants of each variety of fruit will be placed on the plot to get a good sampling. Some of the plants are more vine-like, others are small trees or shrubs.

"When we wrote the pitch, we

framed it as "superfoods," or foods very high in antioxidants," she said. "We'll be testing for cancer-fighting possibilities. There is so much nutrition packed into a tiny berry."

The schedule for the dark fruits grant means that the first trial plants will not be planted until spring 2015 and won't be harvested until 2017.

"It will make a nice demonstration plot for farmers in the area," Estrada said. "There are lots of interesting dark fruits coming, a lot of which I've never seen before."

McGlynn said she has talked to distillers in the Flathead who are interested in using the dark fruits to infuse liquors. The berries have too low a sugar content to distill, but can be made into syrups that distilleries are clamoring for.

Research projects such as the small dark fruit grant will allow Flathead farmers to get new ideas about crops which might grow well in the short growing season, McGlynn added.

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