

Berry Production for Your Small Farm

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These days, many Americans are concerned with the health benefits obtained from the foods they consume. Perhaps that's part of the reason U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics show that domestic berry sales have increased dramatically in recent years. Two crops from this category suitable for many Florida small farms are blueberries and blackberries. Depending on your location, they could provide a tasty harvest of fresh berries from March through July.

As with all agricultural ventures, determining your market is the first step to take in your overall business plan. Whether you plan to sell your crop to visitors at your farm, local retail outlets, shoppers at your local farmers' market or restaurants, do the research to find out when your client base would like to have your product and how much you need to produce to meet demand. Often, you won't be able to pre-sell your crop but it's an advantage to do so when possible.

Figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Florida Agricultural Statistical Directory indicate that in 2007 blueberries were harvested from approximately 2,600 acres in Florida, with gross receipts of almost \$33 million. That means Florida ranks seventh nationally in blueberry revenues and accounts for 8.6 percent of the total value of the U.S. blueberry crop.

Relatively small acreages of blueberries can produce fruit for the wholesale market, which has a marketing window of four to six weeks. But small acreages grown for local distribution can be harvested for up to 12 weeks, depending on location.

The majority of blueberries grown in Florida are known as southern highbush cultivars. They are generally early and high yielding compared with rabbiteye cultivars, which are related to native blueberries. Examples of highbush blueberry cultivars for Florida are Star, Jewell, Springwide and Primadonna. Examples of rabbiteye cultivars are Woodard, Savory, Florida Rose and Climax.

Highbush blueberries thrive from lower Central Florida through the Panhandle. Rabbiteye cultivars, often later maturing and somewhat lower yielding, are grown in upper Central Florida and places farther north. Areas where highbush and rabbiteye cultivars can both be grown will have the best chance for a 10-12 week harvest season.

The majority of commercial blueberries in Florida are being planted in pine bark due to their requirement for low pH and good organic matter content. Adequate drainage and irrigation is usually required for a successful crop. An overhead irrigation system for freeze protection might be necessary for most highbush and some early maturing rabbiteye cultivars.

Although the Florida commercial blackberry industry is small, the potential for local marketing of this crop is quite high. Thornless cultivars such as Arapaho, Navajo and Ouachita would be possible fits for U-pick operations. Thorny cultivars such as Brazos do well under Florida growing conditions.

Many blackberries are produced on trellises for ease of harvest. The plants require a pH of 6-6.5 and supplemental irrigation.

More information is available on the University of Florida/IFAS Small Farms Web site: <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu/>

On Aug. 1-2, 2009, the first Florida Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Conference will be held at Osceola Heritage Park in Kissimmee. The event will feature exhibitors, educational sessions and more. All Florida farmers are invited to attend. Visit the conference Web site at <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu/floridasmallfarmsconference/index.htm>. For information on conference sponsorship or being an exhibitor, contact Bob Hochmuth, 386-362-1725 or bobhoch@ufl.edu.



Photo 1 - Like most commercial blueberries grown in Florida, these plants at Vencis Farm in Center Hill are grown with pine bark, to enhance soil pH, and irrigation, to supply water. Blueberries and blackberries can be lucrative crops for small farmers looking to diversify. Photo by Gary K. England

Photo 2 - Florida's blackberry industry is relatively small, but the potential for local marketing of the fruit is high. These plants, at Vencis Farm in Center Hill are growing under landscape fabric with drip irrigation. Photo by Gary K. England



Photo 3 - In Central and North Florida, blueberries are often grown with overhead irrigation, such as the sprinklers seen here, at Spring Lake Blueberries in Hernando County. By running sprinklers in sub-freezing weather, farmers create a thin coating of ice on the plants, which insulates them and minimizes cold damage. Photo by Gary K. England