

Blueberry Passion



The Morgan Family

Iced blooms are protected from freezing by overhead irrigation

By Eddie McGriff, Coffee County Extension Coordinator



Top Photo: Winn and Gil Morgan inspect their blueberries for damage after a freeze

Bottom Photo: Winn Morgan displays his blueberry plants from his nursery in 1-gallon containers

The blueberry industry recently has seen a rapid expansion in south Georgia. Blueberries have gone from a minor fruit crop in the early eighties to surpassing peaches as Georgia's number one fruit crop. Blueberries, when these new plantings start bearing fruit in a couple of years, will surpass the total combined value of all of Georgia's commercial fruit crops-apples, grapes, blackberries, strawberries and peaches. Georgia might just have to change its name from the "Peach State" to the "Blueberry State."

Gil Morgan has been one of Coffee County's recent blueberry pioneers. Blueberries have evolved from his hobby to a passion and he has passed his zeal for blueberries to his sons Winn and Diskin.

Gil got interested in blueberries when he got married and his father-in-law, Clyde Thomas in Patterson, decided to go into the blueberry business in 1979. Mr. Thomas put in seven acres of blueberries but died in 1990 and the blueberries became overgrown with weeds. Gil and his brother-in-law, Keith Bennett from Alma,





Winn Morgan inspects his Plastic Laying Machine in preparation for blueberry planting

decided after a few years to clean up the blueberries and get them back into production. This led them into going into the blueberry business on halves with their mother-in-law.

Gil says, "It became fun and in the mid-nineties, we started to make a little bit of money so we invested in another five acres of blueberries. Then it started being more of job than a hobby but it was a good job where we could make a little money. It was also good to be out there in the dirt. We bought 87 acres from our mother-in-law and each year when we made a bit of money we would reinvest it and plant more acres. Now we have 50 acres of blueberries in Patterson and have bought equipment to become serious blueberry farmers."

University of Georgia Extension horticulturist Gerard Krewer explains, "There are two types of blueberries grown in Georgia-- Southern highbush, which is mostly grown in bark beds, and rabbiteyes which are grown in soil. Georgia is just a small part of blueberry production nationally but in our market window in May and June, our production is very significant, especially in the fresh market. We've seen some very high processed prices but I would be surprised if these high prices continue for the long run. Some growers, especially potential new ones, need to realize these high prices have not been typical over the last decade."

Highbush blueberries mature earlier than rabbiteye and are picked by hand for the fresh market beginning in mid-to-late April into May. Rabbiteye blueberries mature in late May and are picked from June into early July. Rabbiteyes are picked by hand if the price is high enough early in the season but generally most are picked by machine. Thirty to as much as forty percent of rabbiteye blueberries go to the fresh market while the rest are frozen.

The type of blueberries Gil grows in Patterson is rabbiteyes. He expanded his operation to include highbush blueberries in Coffee County in 1990. Gil notes his highbush blueberries are planted in high density beds where bark is spread six inches deep.

He says, "What we have found out is that highbush blueberries love bark and seem to do better in bark than in soil. High density beds allowed us to put a lot of plants in a small amount of acres. In most years we expect our highbush blueberries to average somewhere around 8,000-10,000 pounds per acre and our rabbiteyes around 5,000-7,000 pounds per acre."

Dr. Krewer notes, "In the fresh market, early in the season, the highbush blueberries have averaged around four dollars a pound but we don't know if these high prices will continue. I would expect these prices to decline somewhat over time. In the later rabbiteye season, fresh market prices have averaged between one and two dollars per pound and only time will tell if we can maintain these prices."

Gil says, "The biggest challenges to growing blueberries are two-fold. First the weather, especially in the spring when it is cold then warms up for a week and then gets cold again. The berries really undergo a stress when we have these cold snaps. Then blueberry plants get treated pretty rough during harvest. They get bent over either with people picking them or by the machine harvesting them. With all this stress and damage, you have the threat of disease and insects. There are a tremendous amount of diseases to worry about."

With a sigh Gil says that last year April 5 was D-Day or doomsday for blueberry growers. He says, "That was the worst freeze in blueberries in the last fifty years. Our fruit had set and was getting some size on it and at three in the morning it

got down to 27 degrees and just wiped out our crop. We lost 90 percent of our rabbiteye crop in Patterson and about half of our highbush crop here in Douglas even though we watered all night to protect against the frost.”

Gil says, “Alma is the blueberry capital of Georgia and Homerville is rapidly expanding its blueberry acreage. Appling County also has quite a few acres of blueberries but in Coffee County, blueberries are still a relatively new crop. One of Coffee County’s bragging rights is that we have always had excellent farmers and I expect in the next five to ten years, blueberries will be a big deal.”

Gil happily notes on a world basis, blueberries are getting to be a more popular fruit because of the health issues. Blueberries are an amazing crop because not only are they delicious but they have exceptional health benefits due to their high levels of antioxidants that suppress certain types of cancer. Scientists are not even sure yet of all of the benefits of blueberries. They just know they are mighty good for you.

Gil hopes folks keep eating more blueberries as we expand production in south Georgia. He says, “In 2000 the average American ate 13 ounces of blueberries and now we are up to 20 ounces. To put that in perspective, Americans eat 14 quarts of ice cream annually so you can see we are not eating enough of what is good for us. It’s going to be a marketing challenge to get people to eat more blueberries but the job should be easier since they taste good and are healthy.”

Winn Morgan has inherited his father’s passion for blueberries and proudly exclaims, “Blueberries are my bread winner.” He has a blueberry nursery where he supplies both rabbiteye and highbush varieties to growers as well as a planting

and management service. Plant prices depend on whether or not a variety has royalty due to its breeder, usually the University of Florida or Georgia.

Winn says, “Rabbiteye blueberries are planted in twelve foot rows with 3.5 feet between each plant or about 1100 plants per acre. Highbush are generally planted in eight foot rows instead of twelve foot rows. Some highbush varieties are going to be machine harvested in the future. We have rabbiteye plants that are thirty-five years old but highbush plants generally start dying off in 8-10 years due to being more susceptible to disease than rabbiteye.”

Winn supplies an A to Z management service for growers in a 5-6 county area around Coffee County. He says, “Once the land is cleared and stumped, I provide a service to bed rows, lay plastic, put in irrigation as well as supply the plants. It is a turn-key operation. I am trying to create a farming venture for people who normally otherwise couldn’t do it. I have the machinery and equipment to get this done for them at a reasonable rate. Another service I provide is I put in bark beds for clients wanting to grow high density blueberries as well as overhead irrigation for frost protection. I also provide a management service for growers where I spray and help manage their crop.”

Dr. Krewer warns, “Blueberries are an expensive crop to grow, especially if growers are planning on high yields. We see a tremendous response to irrigation, fertigation and soil amendments so if growers want to get high yields, they have to be willing to invest in expensive inputs.” † CCM

Father and Son
(Winn and Gil Morgan)
show off their
Highbush Blueberries

