
Why Would You Grow Rabbiteye Blueberries?

Why Plant Rabbiteyes

By Ridley Bell

Mountain Blue Orchards

Alphadale, via Lismore NSW.

In August 1997, my wife, Mieke, and I moved to a new 50 acre property at Alphadale, located on the Bruxner Highway west of Lismore, on the way to the coast at Ballina. The general climate of our area is sub-tropical with fairly dry spring periods, and a summer/autumn wet season. Obviously for us, the prime time to harvest blueberry fruit weather-wise and market-wise is in the "window of opportunity" from September through to late November. This is after the end of the fresh harvest in Michigan and other Northern hemisphere late highbush areas, and before December, when other Southern hemisphere highbush blueberry growers in countries such as Chile, Argentina, South Africa, and New Zealand and also the southern regions of Australia come on stream.

Our company has, since the early 1990s, been involved in a joint venture with Dr. Paul Lyrene at The University of Florida, Gainesville, and Blueberry Farms of Australia, (Chiquita Brands, South Pacific) to assess many new variety releases, seedlings and selections that may suit our purposes. These are predominantly of the Southern Highbush hybrid type.

We are currently propagating a large number of rabbiteye blueberry plants of various varieties for other blueberry growers both in our own region, but also in other parts of Australia. These rabbiteye varieties include both the older 'tried and true' selections as well as some of the newer types.

We are also currently planning the variety composition of the first blocks on our own property, and here is the interesting thing "Apart from a few plants that will be planted for the production of cutting material, we are not planning to include any rabbiteye varieties for fruit production".

Now I can just see the minds of the Victorian growers ticking over as they read this. "If these rabbiteye blueberries were any good, wouldn't you think that he would plant some for himself", and "Haven't we always said that the highbush varieties that we grow are superior to those rabbiteye types"? (By the way, the rabbiteye blueberry, *Vaccinium ashei* Reade, is a native of Florida, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi, and gets its name from the fact that as the fruit ripens it goes through a pink stage when the fruit appear similar to the eyes of a rabbit).

Obviously the conclusion about me not planting rabbiteye varieties is a correct one, but the premise that this is because the rabbiteye variety is not as good to eat as the highbush type is not one that I hold to. In fact my experience is that there is as much variation in flavour and quality between the various rabbiteye varieties as there is between rabbiteye and highbush species.

Our reason for not including the rabbiteye varieties is not a quality question, but rather a question of "Finding blueberry varieties that fit into our preferred window of opportunity". The rabbiteye blueberry, including some of the so-called early varieties such as Windy and Beckyblue, does not ripen here early enough to fit our chosen market. For the larger growers that are looking for a long season and a continuity of supply, then the rabbiteye blueberry can be a very valuable choice because there are some distinct advantages in growing them.

- Rabbiteye varieties are generally tougher in the field than the highbush types, and will grow very vigorously and produce high yields.

- The rabbiteye blueberry because of its firmness and tougher skin, may be machine harvested for the fresh fruit market making the cost of harvesting very competitive at a time when return prices are not.

- Because the fruit maybe machine harvested, the potential for using the fruit on the processing market is good.

- The distinct advantage that growers in Southern regions have found when they have plantsd rabbiteye varieties is that they produce later fruit. The time from flowering to the ripening of the fruit in the rabbiteye varieties is longer than the highbush and southern highbush types, hence the potential to produce late crops.

The above advantages provide some of the reasons that growers have ordered the rabbiteye varieties. But which ones should they be growing ??? Whilst there are a few new varieties being assessed, including some New zealand releases, there are some of the older varieties that are not only proven, but are still very useful for commercial growers. I will attempt to give a brief description of my favourites, and any that I have omitted from this list you may be sure that I have done so for a reason.

CLIMAX an early season plant that grows upright and has proven its toughness in various difficult soil locations. The berries have a good flavour, are medium in size, medium blue colour, and have a small scar. This variety was selected for its potential to machine harvest, and its concentrated ripening period.

PREMIER released from North Carolina this variety is an early season rabbiteye variety, that produces fruit of excellent colour, size and flavour. The bushes are vigorous and productive, and have been suited to mechanical harvesting.

BRIGHTWELL this was released as an early season variety, although my own experience of it is that it may hold fruit until later in the season. The plants are vigorous and upright, producing very large clusters of berries that maybe mechanically harvested. The fruit are medium to large in size, with dry stem scars, and good flavour.

POWDERBLUE probably one of the toughest varieties that I have ever seen. It is a late season variety that may be planted with Tifblue for good cross-pollination. It can be mechanically harvested for fresh fruit, and the fruit has a very attractive pale blue colour, is firm and medium in size.

TIFBLUE this variety was introduced in Georgia in 1955 and was for many years the standard by which all other rabbiteye varieties were judged. The fruit is firm and light blue, and has a good flavour when it is properly ripened. The fruit is in loose clusters, is firm and has a dry stem scar, making it suitable for mechanical harvesting. The fruiting period is as for powderblue and the bush is very productive and vigorous, for many years.

For growers in southern regions that are seeking to grow the rabbiteye types to produce late season berries, I would recommend trialling these and possibly other varieties, although my choice from the above would no doubt be for Tifblue and Powderblue for the late market.

In Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that there is a worthwhile place for some of the rabbiteye varieties to be planted, however, an understanding of the above reasoning may make the choices clear for intending growers. In another article to come, I will look at the benefits and advantages of growing the Southern Highbush varieties for growers in earlier regions.