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# Blueberry Variety Guide For Warmer Climates

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By Ridley Bell

Many blueberry varieties and selections have been trialled for growing in the warmer climate areas of Northern NSW and Southern QLD since 1981. These varieties come primarily from the Southern States of the U.S. such as Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Mississippi. Broadly speaking the varieties may be classified into two main types of blueberry :

- The Southern Highbush type, which is a *Vaccinium* hybrid complex. The varieties within this group have been the most profitable ones for the growers in the northern areas because they ripen during the unique window of opportunity that lies between the end of the season for Northern Hemisphere highbush growers in Michigan, Oregon, Canada and Northern Europe and the main blueberry growing regions in South America, New Zealand, South Africa, and the Southern States of Australia.

- The rabbiteye type, *Vaccinium ashei*, which gets its name from the fact that as the fruit ripens, it goes through a pink stage that to some people resembles the eye of a rabbit. The rabbiteye varieties tend to have a longer period from bloom to ripening, hence tend to be later than the Southern highbush in most areas.

### Southern Highbush Varieties (In order of Ripening)

SHARPEBLUE ..... this has proved to be the most vigorous and adaptive release. The bush is tough and vigorous, generally maintaining an evergreen appearance throughout the winter months. It has grown well in both sandy soils and heavier loams. The fruit has a pleasant flavour, is large and of medium blue appearance. The fruit has a wet scar, and is likely to become soft during very hot weather, meaning that it needs to be harvested frequently to overcome this.

MISTY ..... this variety is a true enigma, in that where it grows vigorously, such as on the red kraznozem soils of Northern NSW, it is very profitable and popular, yet on other soils it has often not grown well and is not a variety of popular choice. To produce high quality, early fruit, Misty is best grown under the evergreen system with attention being paid to nutrition and leaf diseases in order to keep the older leaves. It is an early fruiting variety, with light blue, medium to large fruit of excellent flavour.

BILOXI ..... The variety Biloxi was developed as a pollinator for Misty in Mississippi, for early season areas. One of the parents of this variety is Sharpeblue. In early trial plantings on the North Coast, it has fruited well with large medium flavoured berries early, but the fruit size drops off towards the end of the season. The fruit is light blue, with a mottled bloom appearance. It is of average flavour, with a medium scar and firm fruit. So far, in trial plantings, Biloxi has a

habit of producing late spring flowering and a second harvest, during January and February, which is not necessarily be desired. Pruning in late spring or early summer may reduce this problem.

GULF COAST ..... the variety Gulf Coast has produced good crops of fruit, with good vegetative bud break in some of the very low chilling localities where it has been trialled.

The bush is vigorous and upright, with moderate toughness. The fruit is medium to large blue with a medium colour. The fruit has a problem in that it holds the stems on many of the berries at harvest. The flavour of the fruit is medium.

O'NEAL ..... this variety is an early erect bush that has a short "bloom to ripen" period, making it suitable in areas with late frosts.

The berry has a distinct, very sweet flavour, and is appreciated on the fresh fruit market. I would estimate that it would be a good variety for planting on the cooler tablelands area.

JUBILEE ..... This variety along with Magnolia was released in Mississippi to provide a late blooming blueberry that ripened before the early rabbiteye types.

The bush is upright, vigorous and productive. The fruit is small to medium, with good colour and a medium flavour. The fruit is firm with a dry scar.

MAGNOLIA .... This variety has a more spreading habit and grows vigorously in the right soils. The fruit is medium in size with a very good flavour if allowed to hang for a few days after turning blue. It is a firm fruit with a good picking scar.

SUNSHINE BLUE ..... this is an ornamental blueberry that grows to about one metre high. It has attractive small leaves and a very attractive pink flower. The fruit is small to medium, dark, and of average flavour. The plants may be used as landscape specimens, and in patio containers. It is not recommended for commercial planting.

Rabbiteye Varieties (In order of ripening)

WINDY ..... A very early rabbiteye variety from Florida. Fruit size is small, and the texture is gritty and of average flavour. This has not been a popular choice particularly for fresh fruit sales. The bush is vigorous, and yields well.

BECKBLUE .....this variety like windy is early, but suffers from very poor pollination, due to the shape of the corolla. The

bush is vigorous, and the fruit that is produced is medium to large and of a good flavour, but yields have been low on the North Coast over the many years that it has been grown. It is not recommended for commercial planting.

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. Planted with Premier, it is a good commercial choice.

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 in Georgia as an early- mid 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 average flavour. The fruit may have a rabbiteye 'grittiness' about it, that some people do not like. Brightwell has consistently been the highest yielding blueberry on our farm.

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 medium in firmness 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.

CENTURION .... This has the latest season of ripening available. On the north coast of NSW, this is an upright plant, that blooms late and the flowers may be self fertile.

The fruit is small and dark, with a good taste.