

Blueberry



Crossbreeding blueberry

In 1948, University of Florida horticulturist Ralph Sharpe noted that the market for fresh blueberries in the U.S. was expanding rapidly, but that no blueberries were available until late May when harvest began in eastern North Carolina. Sharpe also noted that the wild blueberry ripened in north Florida starting in late April. Although these wild berries had excellent flavor and aroma, the berries were too small and the plants too low-yielding to be cultivated profitably.

Commercial blueberry varieties from Michigan, New Jersey and North Carolina survived poorly and produced little fruit when planted in Florida. Florida winters were too warm to satisfy their chilling requirement, and the northern varieties were too susceptible to leaf, root and stem diseases that flourished because of Florida's long, wet summers. After spending two years studying the wild blueberries native to

Florida, Sharpe selected the Florida evergreen lowbush blueberry, *Vaccinium darrowi*, to cross with the northern varieties. During his explorations, Sharpe found some wild blueberry plants growing around a lake near Winter Haven that produced unusually large berries with a powdery blue color, and these plants became the source of the

low chilling requirement and heat tolerance of Florida's high-bush blueberry varieties. Today, nearly 100 percent of the blueberries harvested in April and early May in the northern hemisphere and during October and early November in the southern hemisphere trace their ancestry back to this Florida lowbush blueberry.

Yet, there remained many obstacles to the establishment of a commercial blueberry industry in Florida. Berry quality and size, diseases and insects, and heat resistance were the major challenges. After several years and cycles of crossing and selection, Paul Lyrene developed today's newer commercial varieties, which have larger berries, stronger bushes and higher yields. These new berries also ripen earlier and are easier to pick and ship. Today's varieties have made Florida blueberry production what it is today – a crop that sells 4 million pounds per year, with a farm-gate value of \$20 million.

Blueberry Varieties Released by FAES

| Variety | Date of Release |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| Bluegem | 1970 |
| Sharpblue, Floridablue | 1975 |
| Aliceblue, Beckyblue, Avonblue | 1977 |
| Bonita, Chaucer, Choice | 1985 |
| Misty | 1990 |
| Windy, Snowflake, Marimba | 1992 |
| Star, Southmoon | 1995 |
| Santa Fe, Bluecrisp | 1998 |
| Jewel, Sapphire | 1999 |
| Emerald | 2000 |
| Windsor, Millennia | 2001 |
| Southern Belle, Sebring | 2002 |
| Savory, Florida Rose | 2003 |