

Tennessee Grower Profile:

Margie and David Hunter
Hunter Farms

White County – Sparta, Tennessee

Chronicling Specialty Crop Marketing in Tennessee

FOCUS ON BLUEBERRIES

Rachel Painter | Center for Profitable Agriculture



TENNESSEE BLUEBERRY MARKET:

According to Census data from the USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service, the average blueberry operation is just over one acre in Tennessee. The number of blueberry farms in Tennessee increased by 27% over the last USDA Census period, from 2007-2012. Surrounding states, including North Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, and Virginia, also experienced an increase in the number of blueberry farms and acreage in blueberry production. The U.S. production and import of blueberries has increased rapidly to meet increasing, year-round consumer demand (USDA-ERS). Blueberries have increased in popularity with the identification of antioxidant properties and other health benefits.

Blueberries are often part of a diversified farm operation that offers multiple fruit or specialty crop options for consumers. Commercial blueberry producers must have the ability to cool and dry the berries immediately after harvest to increase shelf life.

Series of grower profiles of selected specialty crops in Tennessee.

- Cut Flowers
- Persimmons
- Blueberries
- Elderberries
- Garlic
- Microgreens

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As blueberries do not continue to ripen after harvest and most cultivars have a two to three week harvest period, an important aspect of blueberry production is cultivar selection. Selecting cultivars with varying harvest windows can help extend the fruiting season and decrease extreme spikes in labor demand. Many commercial blueberry producers have the ability to cool and dry the berries immediately after harvest to increase shelf life and consistently provide customers with high-quality berries.

With the lack of processing facilities for blueberries and similar fruits in the state, most blueberries produced are sold as fresh, whole berries. Many producers market direct to consumers through on-farm stands, you-pick operations, and farmers markets. Producers also utilize local grocery stores, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares, and food hubs to sell locally-produced, fresh blueberries.



COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FARM

"Our rows are 8 feet apart and plants are 4 feet apart."

"We have landscape fabric and drip irrigation on the ground."

"We changed to selling in pint, quart, and gallon clamshells because that is what the customer wanted. The clamshells help protect the berries and prolong shelf life, and they also look nice with the logo on top."

"We have about 2 acres of blueberry production, with two Rabbiteye varieties, Premier and Tifblue. We also have Climax, a variety used as a cross-pollinator. We did have Duke, a highbush variety, that did not do well for us."



"To choose varieties, we utilized Extension recommendations. We set up a site visit through our county Agent, and Dr. Lockwood provided us with recommended cultivars to meet our goals and extend the harvest season."

"We soil sampled through the UT Soil, Plant, and Pest Center to lower our pH. We took a tiller to incorporate the recommended amendments and rotten sawdust in the soil and then mounded the rows. We retest every couple of years to monitor the pH and adjust as needed."

"We hire labor to pick for us. Having a reliable labor force is critical."



"We started growing blueberries for diversification. We have a commercial poultry house and raise registered angus. We were looking at all kinds of berries and considering our options. Another local berry farmer suggested sticking with blueberries."

"We sell through many outlets. We sell through a food hub in a major city that sells direct to consumer and through high-end restaurants and grocery stores. We sell through another local farmer's CSA program. We also sell at farmers markets when we have a surplus."

"We promote through our Hunter Farms Facebook page, word of mouth, connections with other local farms, and the food hub."

"We always sell out of all that we take to the markets"

"Originally, we focused on local markets and grocery stores, but now we sell most of our blueberries through the food hub."

In terms of the financial reality of producing and marketing the blueberries, "they have exceeded our expectations. We have been selling all we can grow for 9 years now."

"Like many people have said before me, there's a lot easier ways to make money."

"Be patient. Be prepared. There's a lot of labor involved in harvesting blueberries, and you need a labor force to pick it and somewhere to market and sell them already lined up since it's a highly perishable product."



"Its important to have a product you can be proud of."

"We like growing blueberries because they are a healthy option. We can be proud of producing something to help ourselves and others eat healthier."

"Learn your customers. Take care of your customers."

"UT Extension, and specifically Dr. Lockwood, has been instrumental in the success of our operation."

"Other producers in the area are a good source of information. We can all learn and grow together."

"We have an airconditioned storage and packing area that helps extend the shelf life and gives us some time to get it to market and the consumer."

"We had a problem with wet berries in the past. If it was raining or if we picked early in the morning while dew was still on the berries, the berries wouldn't dry and that leads to faster degradation of the berry. So, we built a dryer to dry them so they don't mildew or ruin."





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