

New Rabbiteye Blueberry Varieties From The University of Georgia



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The University of Georgia Blueberry Breeding Program is aggressively developing new cultivars for use by commercial growers, small pick-your-own operations and home gardeners. Our goal is to provide well adapted plants with high quality fruit for the Southeastern U.S. and other regions with similar climates. The program has been in existence for several decades, and this long term effort has led to great improvement of the plant material that is available. Many blueberry varieties on the market today are older selections, however, in the past few years newer varieties with superior performance have been developed. The following is a brief description (with photos) of new **rabbiteye blueberry** (*Vaccinium virgatum* Aiton; syn. *V. ashei* Reade) varieties that have been released by Dr. Scott NeSmith's UGA Blueberry Breeding Program since 2000. Varieties are presented in relative order of their release, from oldest to most recent.

Please note the new blueberry releases from UGA are protected varieties and require a license to propagate. Propagation rights are controlled by University of Georgia Research Foundation, Innovation Gateway, GSRC Boyd Bldg, Athens, Ga. 30602-7411 (<http://research.uga.edu/gateway/>).

Alapaha Rabbiteye Blueberry

Alapaha (uh-la-puh-HAH), named for the Alapaha River in south Georgia, was released in 2001 as an early season rabbiteye blueberry. Plants of Alapaha are vigorous and upright with narrow crowns. The variety flowers relatively late (7 to 10 days after the older variety Climax), which helps avoidance of spring freeze damage; yet, fruit of Alapaha ripens quickly, beginning about the same time as fruit ripening of Climax. Alapaha berries are medium in size, which is ideal for both fresh and frozen packs. Fruit have good firmness and flavor. Berry color is good, although the fruit are medium dark blue, and they have a small dry scar, which contributes to good shelf life. Chilling requirement for Alapaha is estimated to be 450 to 500 hours $< 7\text{ C}$ (45 F). The variety has proven to be suitable for mechanical harvesting and it has demonstrated improved resistance to rain cracking. Alapaha is recommended for areas where rabbiteye blueberries are grown successfully as an early ripening variety to replace Climax. Alapaha has shown some self fruitfulness, but it should be planted with other rabbiteye blueberries with a similar time of bloom for cross pollination. Recommended companion variety is Vernon. USPP 16,266.



Figure 1. Alapaha plants at bloom time.



Figure 2. Alapaha rabbiteye blueberry fruit during ripening.



Figure 3. Ripe berries of the early season rabbiteye blueberry variety Alapaha.

Ochlockonee Rabbiteye Blueberry

‘Ochlockonee’ (ok-LAHK-uh-nee), named after the Ochlockonee River in south Georgia, is a late season rabbiteye blueberry that was released in 2002. Plants of Ochlockonee are vigorous, upright and have moderately narrow crowns. They produce abundant fruiting stems annually with only moderate growth. Ochlockonee is very productive in yield, substantially exceeding Tifblue, a widely grown older standard variety. Berries of Ochlockonee ripen about one week after Tifblue, and are larger in size. Other important fruit characters (stem scar, color, firmness, and flavor) of Ochlockonee are good, being similar to Tifblue and Powderblue. Plants of Ochlockonee generally flower late enough to escape spring freezes in south and middle Georgia. It is recommended that both large commercial and smaller growers desiring a late ripening rabbiteye blueberry try Ochlockonee in areas where rabbiteye blueberries are successfully grown. The estimated chill requirement of the variety is 650 to 700 hours < 7C (45 F). Ochlockonee has proven to be suitable for mechanical harvesting. The variety should be planted with other rabbiteye blueberries for cross pollination, and Powderblue is a recommended companion variety. USPP 17,300.



Figure 4. Ochlockonee rabbiteye blueberry plants during bloom time.



Figure 5. Ochlockonee rabbiteye blueberry plants as fruit beginning to ripen.



Figure 6. Ripe berries of Ochlockonee rabbiteye blueberry.

Vernon Rabbiteye Blueberry

Vernon is an early season rabbiteye blueberry released in 2004. The variety has good yields and excellent plant vigor. Although plants of Vernon often flower 7 days after Climax in south Georgia, they can flower earlier than desired in some years when temperatures warm up quickly. However, Vernon fruit ripens early for a rabbiteye, usually several days ahead of Climax and Premier. Berries of Vernon are large and have excellent firmness. Color and flavor are good, and dry scars contribute to good shelf life. Both flavor and berry size improve as fruit hang ripe for an extra few days. Vernon is recommended where rabbiteye blueberries are grown successfully as an early ripening cultivar to replace Climax and/or Premier. The estimated chill requirement of the variety is 450 hours < 7 C (45 F). Vernon has shown to be suitable for mechanical harvesting. Care should be used in fertilizing Vernon, as over fertilization (especially nitrogen) can promote excess vegetative vigor which does not readily contribute to yield. The variety should be planted with other rabbiteye blueberries for cross pollination. Alapaha is a recommended companion variety. USPP 18,291.



Figure 7. Vernon rabbiteye blueberry at bloom time.



Figure 8. Vernon rabbiteye blueberry plants during ripening.



Figure 9. Ripe berries of the rabbiteye blueberry variety Vernon (upper photo). The lower photo shows Vernon (T-584) berries compared to the older variety Premier.

Titan™ Rabbiteye Blueberry

Titan™ is a large fruited rabbiteye blueberry released in 2010. The variety has very high yields and excellent plant vigor. Berries are very large, often exceeding 3 g/berry, which is larger than any rabbiteye released to date. Fruit are also very firm, and hang well on the plant when ripe. The ability to hang well allows for even greater berry sizes to be achieved as berry size continues to increase after fruit turn blue. Titan™ berry color and flavor are good, and dry scars contribute to good shelf life. Titan™ ripens generally with Vernon and Premier, but has berry size larger than both of these. Plants are upright, and crowns are narrow. Plants have responded well to pruning and hedging, reinvigorating easily with new healthy fruiting wood. The new variety should be suitable for machine harvesting. Titan™ is recommended where rabbiteye blueberries are grown successfully as a commercial, home owner, and pick-your-own variety. The estimated chill requirement of the variety is 500 to 550 hours < 7 C (45 F). It must be noted that Titan™ does have significant fruit cracking under wet conditions. The variety should be planted with other rabbiteye blueberries to encourage good cross pollination. Krewer™ is a recommended companion variety. The variety was patented as T-959 (USPP 24,135).



Figure 10. Plants of Titan™ during flowering



Figure 11. Titan™ fruit on 3rd leaf plants during ripening.



Figure 12. Titan™ fruit (T-959) size compared to Premier (upper photo). Titan™ fruit covering a US quarter (lower photo).

Krewer™ Rabbiteye Blueberry

Krewer™ is a large fruited rabbiteye blueberry released in 2015. Named in honor of retired UGA Blueberry Extension Specialist, Dr. Gerard Krewer, the new variety has very high yields and excellent plant vigor. Berries are very large, often exceeding 3 g/berry, which joins Titan™ as the largest fruited rabbiteye varieties released to date. Fruit are also firm, and hang well on the plant when ripe. The ability to hang well allows for even greater berry sizes to be achieved as berry size continues to increase after fruit turn blue. Krewer™ berry color is good, but the fruit needs to be allowed to develop full color to avoid having “pink butts”. Fully developed flavor is very sweet, and a dry scar contributes to good shelf life. Krewer™ generally flowers and ripens earlier than Vernon and Premier, but has berry size larger than both of these. Plants are semi-upright, and crowns are relatively narrow. Plants have responded well to pruning and hedging, reinvigorating easily with new healthy fruiting wood. The new variety should be suitable for machine harvesting. Krewer™ is recommended where rabbiteye blueberries are grown successfully as a commercial, home owner, and pick-your-own variety. The estimated chill requirement of the variety is 350 to 400 hours < 7 C (45 F). The variety should be planted with other rabbiteye blueberries for good cross pollination. Titan™ is a recommended companion variety. USPP applied for.



Figure 13. Plants of Krewer™ during flowering



Figure 14. Krewer™ fruit during ripening.



Figure 15. KrewerTM fruit (T-1101) pictured with a US quarter.