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For Publication in The Daily Mountain Eagle

I have very fond memories as a kid growing up on the farm and hauling corn and vegetables to the market on Finley Avenue in Birmingham with my Dad. It was certainly a lot of hard work, but there is just something pleasing about growing and selling fresh produce to your customers.....and besides that my Dad paid me \$10 and I only had to work one whole day to get it! The labor market has apparently changed a little since I was a kid. One thing that hasn't changed since those days back long ago is people's love for fresh home grown fruits and vegetables.

I have noticed over the years there is a lack of quantity and variety of small fruits available for consumers. Small fruits would include blackberries, blueberries, strawberries, figs, and muscadine grapes. Figs are technically a tree fruit, but since they're produced in such small quantity I'll include them in this group. Let's examine each of these from a production and marketing standpoint.

Years ago, every old "home place" had a fig bush or two. These provided everyone with enough fruit to eat fresh and make fig preserves. Today, I rarely see figs planted around new homes, but the demand for the fruit is still strong. This provides opportunity for a few folks to plant several figs and market them along with other produce and fruit items. Figs require a sunny spot, away from other trees and shrubs. They require a pH of 6 to 6.5. It is important to keep the grass away from newly planted trees for at least two years. They are relatively disease and insect free, except when the bees and wasp find the ripe fruit. Recommended varieties include Brown Turkey, LSU Purple and Celeste. Figs usually ripen around the first of August in our area.

Strawberry production has changed over the years for commercial producers. About 1990, strawberry producers in the area switched from growing strawberries using the matted row system, to the annual hill system. Utilizing the matted row system, growers planted, maintained and rejuvenated the plantings every two or three years, always using the same plant material from the original planting. Plantings were susceptible to spring rains which can ruin ripe fruit in a hurry. Home gardeners still use this method to produce berries. Utilizing the annual hill method, producers grow on raised beds, using plastic mulch and drip irrigation. This allows for better control of water and therefore better control of disease. They lay new beds each fall and plant new plants every year. They fertilize the crop at planting and as they irrigate during the growing season. Strawberries begin to ripen about April 10<sup>th</sup> in our area; however harvest date is weather dependant. Strawberries like a soil pH of 6 – 6.5, a sunny location and a good drink when the weather turns dry. Varieties for annual hill production include Camarosa, Chandler and Ventana. Varieties recommended for the matted row system include Cardinal, Allstar, Earliglow and many others.

Most annual hill berries grown today are marketed as u-pick berries or offered at roadside stands. Local farm markets usually do not open early enough to offer consumers fresh, home grown strawberries. Fresh berries usually sell well because it is the first fresh fruit of the season not to mention strawberry preserves, strawberry pie, chocolate covered strawberries, etc. You know what I mean, they're good!

Blueberries can usually be found at local markets in the summer. It is the one small fruit that has been widely planted and is available at markets and is also marketed as a u-pick fruit. A half dozen plants will usually produce enough fruit to supply the family and provide some to sell or give away, more than that and you better find a market. We normally plant rabbiteye varieties such as Tifblue, Powderblue and Premier. Blueberries require a soil pH of 4.5 to 5.2. If your soil pH is in the 5.5 range or higher do not plant. Knowing the soil pH is critical when considering a blueberry planting. Blueberries usually begin to ripen in late June or early July. The harvest period can be extended by selecting varieties that mature early, mid and late season. They are relatively insect and disease free, sell well but require a good deal of labor to harvest.

Blackberry producers are few and far between. That means that it is rare to find an offering of blackberry fruit for sell on any market. It's even harder to find someone willing to pick a gallon or two of wild berries. The market is wide open to anyone wanting to learn and put effort into growing this crop. There are some really good "thorny" and "thornless" varieties available today. Recommended thorny varieties include Choctaw and Kiowa. Thornless varieties include Apache, Navaho and Arapaho. The thornless varieties need to be trellised to some extent and both types need to be pruned every year after the second season. Blackberries like a soil pH of 6 to 6.5, a sunny location and need to be watered during drought. Blackberries ripen mid to late June and require a good bit of labor to harvest, which must be done every day or two.

Muscadines ripen late August through September. They require a pH of 6 to 6.5 and will grow well in just about any soil type in full sun. Muscadines are divided into self-fertile and female plant types. Self-fertile varieties do not require a pollinator, because they have male and female flowers on the same vine. If one plants the female varieties, which have only female flowers, a pollinator or self-fertile plant must be in close proximity to pollinate the female flowers. The variety selected to plant will depend on the use of the grape. Muscadine grape varieties for jelly, jam or preserves would include Ison, Sugargate, Black Fry and Tara. Wine grape varieties would include Ison, Noble, Tara, Dixie Red and Carlos. Muscadine varieties may be black, bronze or red in color. The Scuppernong is just one of several varieties of bronze muscadine. Others include Fry, Pam, Sweet Jenny, Tara and others. Some of the black varieties include Ison, Supreme, Black Beauty, Hunt and Cowart. Red varieties include Summit, Rosa, Scarlet, Higgins and Dixie Red. Muscadines are offered as a u-pick fruit and are often found in local markets in season. However, the offerings are small when compared to the demand for this product.

I think there are some good opportunities for producers of small fruits across Alabama and here in Walker County as well. This is especially true given the growth and increased traffic flow that is sure to result from the development along the new I-22 corridor. Like all aspects of agriculture, there is nothing easy about planting and maintaining a vineyard or planting of blueberries, strawberries, blackberries or figs. They all require a good deal of input of money, time and labor but the potential for a good return on investment is there. A good marketing strategy and source of labor are two of the most critical factors when considering an enterprise of this type. I would like to take the opportunity to thank Dan Porch, Regional Extension Agent, who has forgotten more about small fruit production than I will ever know for use of much of the technical information in this article. For more information about these crops contact the Walker

County Extension Office at 221-3392 or Regional Extension Agents for Commercial Horticulture Dan Poch at 256-582-2009 or Doug Chapman at 256-232-5510.