

Blueberries

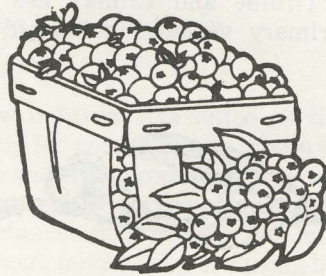
*Although native rabbiteye blueberries (*Vaccinium ashei*, Reade) have grown wild for years along Georgia's streams and rivers, the fruit was not cultivated commercially until the twentieth century.*

Mr. O.J. Woodard of the Coastal Plain Experiment station in Tifton set out the first cultivated rabbiteye plants in Georgia in 1925. He planted five plants each of 25 native selections which came from the northwest and north central areas of Florida and southeast Georgia. Of these selections, only two, Ruby and Black Giant, were named at that time.

Up until Woodard's plantings, little research had been conducted on the rabbiteye blueberry. But in 1939, the first rabbiteye breeding research was started at the Coastal Plain Station. Then, in 1940, a cooperative research program was initiated with the USDA in Beltsville, Maryland.

Rabbiteye breeding work was expanded in Georgia by Dr. W.T. Brightwell in 1944. The work soon paid off with the following varieties released between 1950 and 1960: Callaway, Coastal, Homebell, Tifblue and Woodard.

During the several years that followed, thousands of seedlings were evaluated in the cooperative program with the USDA, resulting in the release of three additional varieties in 1969. These were the Briteblue, Delite and Southland. Bluebelle and Climax were released in 1974. Two other varieties, the Baldwin and Georgiagem, were re-



leased by the Experiment Station in 1986.

Using plants from the breeding program, the first commercial rabbiteye enterprise in Georgia was started in 1955 on one third acre near Savannah. Four commercial plantings were initiated between 1958 and 1961, giving the state about 45 planted acres.

In 1968, Alma was chosen as one of the cities for the state's model city program. This program was designed to boost the economic development of designated cities and their surrounding rural areas.

As part of the program, blueberry production was suggested as a possible commercial enterprise for the area. With assistance from the University of Georgia and the Rural Development Center in Tifton, the first plantings were made in the early to mid 1970's. Growers purchased every available plant in Georgia and north Florida to obtain