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# Mississippi

# *Vaccinium* Journal

Volume 2, Issue 4

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## A Difficult Year for Many

The weather was very uncooperative nearly all season long, with late freezes, rain, and hail playing havoc with the Mississippi blueberry crop. All in all the blueberry year in South Mississippi was down from last year. On the positive side, Spotted Wing Drosophila damage was less this year, but unfortunately it is here to stay. Other issues with labor continue to cause problems. Two things the GSBGA association are doing to address the latest issues in the industry are to have a field day that had a big focus on helping growers connect with exhibitors and each other (October 10, 2013 — see a recap of the event in this issue) and partnering with MSU-ES and USDA-ARS to present an upcoming educational workshop to be held in February in Hattiesburg (see more info on page 3). GAP and GHP workshops are also coming soon. Overall though it wasn't the best year to be a blueberry grower, we can all learn important lessons from this year and apply them to the future — if we take the time to recognize and learn from our setbacks. Hopefully this newsletter helps in that regard.

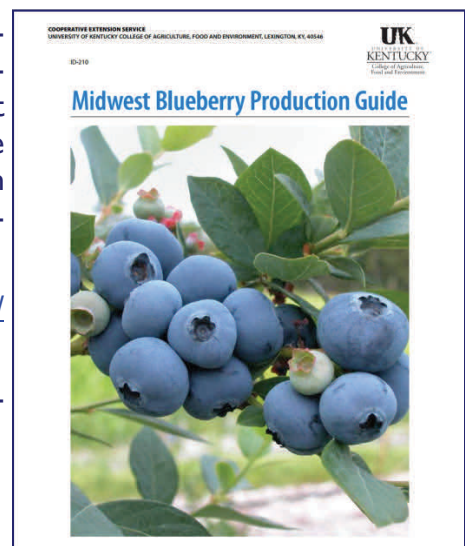
## A New Online Blueberry Publication Available

Dr. Eric T. Stafne, MSU-ES, Fruit Specialist

Recently I was part of a team that developed the new Midwest Blueberry Production Guide. Although I am well aware that I no longer live in the Midwest, there are lots of great photos as well as information suitable for our region. It can be downloaded as a pdf file here:

(<http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/ID/ID210/ID210.pdf>)

It is published by the University of Kentucky.



## Upcoming Workshop on Mechanical Harvest and Food Safety

Eric T. Stafne—Mississippi State University, Fruit Specialist

Mississippi State University-Extension Service, USDA-ARS, and the Gulf South Blueberry Growers will present a workshop with focus on Mechanized harvest for fresh market, food safety, and other important topics. We encourage you to attend this important workshop that will give you the latest information on these topics.

The workshop will be held on **Thursday, February 13, 2014** for blueberry growers and other fruit growers concerned about these emerging issues.

The workshop will be held from **1-5pm** at the Mississippi State University Forrest County Extension Office. The address of the office is **952 Sullivan Drive, Hattiesburg, MS 39401-2714**.

Guest speaker for the event will be Dr. Fumiomi Takeda from the USDA-ARS in Kearneysville, WV (photo below). Dr. Takeda is an expert in mechanized harvest for blueberries and other fruit crops. Dr. Juan Silva from Mississippi State University and other speakers will be there as well.

More information will be available closer to the event time, but please plan to attend now. You cannot afford to miss the information that will be presented!



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For more information contact **Dr. Eric Stafne** at **601-403-8939** or **estafne@ext.msstate.edu**



# Upcoming Workshops on GAPs and GHPs

Eric T. Stafne—Mississippi State University, Fruit Specialist



Developing and Implementing

## GAPs and GHPs

Programs for Producing

High Quality and Safer

Fruits and Vegetables in

Mississippi



**All Meetings:**

**8:00 am - 5:00 pm**

January 13, 2014 - Forrest County Extension, Hattiesburg

February 10, 2014 - CMREC, Jackson / Raymond

February 17, 2014 - Bost Building, Auditorium, Starkville

March 11, 2014 - CREC, Biloxi

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CREC Experimental Seafood Processing Laboratory

c/o Randy Coker

3411 Frederic Street

Pascagoula, MS 39567

-See next page for more information-

## Upcoming Workshops on GAPs and GHPs, cont.

Eric T. Stafne—Mississippi State University, Fruit Specialist

### INTRODUCTION

Fresh fruits and vegetables most often are grown in an open environment where there are multiple opportunities for exposure to microbiological and chemical hazards. Recently, recalls and foodborne illness outbreaks linked to fresh fruits and vegetables have increased. Most of these outbreaks were associated with microbial contamination including *Salmonella*, *E. coli* O157:H7, *Listeria monocytogenes*, Norovirus and Hepatitis A virus. The major concerns for food safety come from human feces, animal manures, water, wildlife, and workers. Because fresh fruits and vegetable are often consumed raw, there is no absolute kill step such as cooking that ensures safe produce. Furthermore, there is no cleansing step that can remove all biological and chemical hazards. Preventing and controlling the contamination of fresh produce at the farm is the key to producing wholesome, healthy products. More companies that distribute fresh produce are becoming aware of the importance of the safety issues/programs (such as GAPs/GHPs) and they are demanding mandatory third party independent audits of fresh produce producers as a prerequisite for purchasing.

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this course/workshop is to introduce the Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) and Good Handling/Manufacturing Practices (GHPs/GMPs) programs to Mississippi's produce industry so that producers can develop and implement farm food safety plans which prepare them for GAPs/GHPs certification.

By executing and documenting GAPs and GHPs, fresh produce producers can assure government regulators and customers worldwide that the produce industry in Mississippi is diligent in its commitment to producing safe, high-quality fruits and vegetables so they can market their products with greater confidence.

### TOPICS

- ⇒ Site selection and soil
- ⇒ Agricultural water
- ⇒ Fertilizer use
- ⇒ Pesticide use
- ⇒ Animal exclusion and pest control
- ⇒ Worker health and hygiene
- ⇒ Traceability
- ⇒ Harvesting
- ⇒ Cooling
- ⇒ Produce cleaning and water treatment
- ⇒ Packing and storage
- ⇒ Transportation
- ⇒ USDA audit verification checklist

### TARGET AUDIENCE

Farmers/producers involved with the fruits and vegetables industry in Mississippi.

### ADMISSION: NO FEE

Refreshments and lunch will be provided [this project has been funded by the USDA-NIFA through the Southern Risk Management Education Center (SRMEC)]

### FACTORS

- ⇒ Attendance is limited to 25 participants for each location and space is available on a first registered basis.
- ⇒ There will be two tests (pre/post-tests) associated with the course.
- ⇒ Persons completing the course will receive a "Certificate of GAPs/GHPs Course Completion" from CREC/MSU.

### COURSE INSTRUCTORS

- Dr. Barakat Mahmood
- Dr. Christine Coker
- Dr. Eric Stafne
- Dr. Gary Bachman
- Ms. Nicole Bell

**PLEASE DETACH THIS SECTION AND RETURN TO:**

**Randy Coker**  
**Experimental Seafood Processing Laboratory**  
**3411 Frederic Street**  
**Pascagoula, MS 39567**

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COMPANY \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_

STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_

Please X check the date you wish to attend:

- \_\_\_\_\_ January 13, 2014
- \_\_\_\_\_ February 10, 2014
- \_\_\_\_\_ February 17, 2014
- \_\_\_\_\_ March 11, 2014

For more information contact:

**Dr. Barakat Mahmood**  
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## 2013 Gulf South Blueberry Growers Association Field Day and Trade Show Recap

John Braswell, Ph.D., Secretary and Treasurer, GSBGA

The Gulf South Blueberry Growers Association held a successful Field Day and Trade Show at the Blue River Farm, in Covington County, Mississippi, October 10, 2013. The event was well attended by Blueberry Growers from across the Gulf South Region with 107 registered growers. The Trade show consisted of 34 registered exhibitors which included 54 people. The total attendance was about 160 people. The weather was perfect for the outside event. A lot of activities were underway during the day with Farm Tours, Wind Machine Demonstrations, Irrigation Workshops, Equipment and Harvester Exhibits and a wide variety of blueberry supplies and equipment were demonstrated and displayed for the growers to examine. An excellent lunch was served and a good time was had by all.

The Field Day was an excellent opportunity to see blueberry management and production techniques and learn about innovative ways to grow and produce blueberries. Blue River Farm, located at 1876 Highway 532, Mount Olive, MS, Owned by Max Draughn and operated by Greg Saulters, is a well-managed, 60 acre, blueberry farm that has incorporated good management techniques and innovative ways to establish and produce blueberries. It is an excellent example of how close attention to detail has resulted in vigorous plant growth and high yields. They have developed a procedure to efficiently and economically harvest and pack large volumes of high quality fruit. The farm displays a progression of innovations that have been developed and added each year to improve the efficiency of the operation. Growers were able to tour this productive farm and the efficient processing facility and discuss the management techniques. We appreciate Max Draughn and Greg Saulters opening their operation to the group and allowing the growers to see the techniques they use to make their farm a success.

The Trade Show was an excellent display of blueberry equipment and supplies. Equipment dealers from all over the United States were on hand to demonstrate and discuss their equipment. Some of the exhibitors included:

Blueberry Harvesting Equipment – Littau Harvesters from Stayton, WA, brought their newest and most sophisticated harvester with advanced features to make it possible to harvest fresh quality blueberries. Littau Harvesters are the most versatile, maneuverable and sophisticated blueberry harvester on the market. The majority of the blueberry harvesters in the Gulf South are Littau. Their quality and service are very well respected.

Blueberry Harvesting Supplies – Thunderbird Plastics, Ltd of Lake Oswego, OR and Ropak Packaging of Jacksonville, FL were present with a wide assortment of field lugs and their newest assortment of blueberry harvesting supplies.

Blueberry Grading Equipment - An important aspect to mechanically harvesting fresh quality blueberries is having access to good quality grading equipment. Three companies brought their equipment for the blueberry growers to examine: A&B Packing Equipment from Hartford, MI; Lakewood Processing Equip. from Holland, MI and BBC Technologies from South Haven, MI. These companies manufacture the finest grading equipment on the market today. Representatives were on hand to discuss and demonstrate the blueberry grading and packing equipment. It was an excellent opportunity to see the best grading equipment manufacturers in one location with their newest equipment on display.

—Continued next page—

## GSBGA Field Day and Trade Show Recap, cont.

John Braswell

Freeze Protection Equipment - Cascade Wind Machines of Yakima, WA, the Orchard-Rite Wind Machine Representative was on hand to discuss how wind machines can protect the blueberry crop from late spring freezes and demonstrate how they work.

Pruning Equipment – a representative from Brewt Power Systems of Merced, CA was on hand to demonstrate pneumatic pruners which are used widely to maintain and invigorate blueberry bushes.

Tractors and Blueberry Equipment – Watt's Brothers Tractor, Company of Hattiesburg, MS; Bennett's Tractor Service of Waycross, GA; Southern Tractor Company of Hattiesburg, MS; Chemical Containers, Inc. of Lake Wales, FL and Laurel Yamaha of Laurel, MS were on hand with tractors, equipment, sprayers and implements to help growers with establishment of new plantings and maintaining current acreage. Also on display were side by sides and ATVs for versatility in farm management needs. Professionals with these companies were on hand to demonstrate the equipment and answer questions.

Irrigation Equipment – Representatives from Irrigation Mart Inc. of Ruston, La and Poly Drip LLC of Baton Rouge, LA were on hand to help growers with their irrigation needs and assist with designing an efficient system to apply water and fertilizer to blueberry fields.

Blueberry Farm Supplies -Representatives from Agri-AFC LLC of Hattiesburg, MS, Helena Chemical Co. of Canton MS, BWI of Jackson, MS; Island Grove Ag Products of Hawthorn, FL; Graco Fertilizer of Cairo, Georgia; Agrium-Rainbow Fertilizer of Birmingham, AL and Delta Ag Formulations of Greenville, MS; were on hand to discuss horticultural supplies, fertilizer formulations, distribution techniques and crop protection products as well as other horticultural products to help maximize blueberry yields, increase efficiency and decrease cost.

Labor - Acquiring labor has become one of the most challenging aspects of running a blueberry farm. A representative from H2A Complete, LLC of Southaven, MS was on hand to describe how to acquire and manage legal, efficient, hardworking labor.

Blueberry Packaging Materials – Representatives from Monte Packaging Company of South Haven, MI; Southland Container, Inc. of Flora, MS; Century Corrugated Containers of Kilgore, Texas and FormTex Plastics Corp. of Huston, TX were on hand to discuss packaging options and products that can help fine-tune marketing and sell blueberries to more lucrative markets.

Blueberry Nurseries – Representatives from Ambers Blueberry Nursery of Waynesboro, MS and Island Grove Agricultural Products of Hawthorn, FL were on hand to discuss blueberry varieties and help growers with their plant needs.

A program was held at 8:30 AM to briefly describe Blue River Farm and the techniques and products used that make Blue River Farm Successful. The rest of the day was spent visiting with exhibitors and other growers and touring the Farm. Growers left with knowledge of new technology and new techniques to make their farms more efficient and more profitable.

# Photos from GSBGA Field Day and Trade Show, cont.

Eric Stafne



## Photos of the GSBGA Field Day and Trade Show, cont.

Eric Stafne



As you can see from the photos, the GSBGA Field Day and Trade Show was a great event for all involved. Thanks to everyone who helped out, especially Dr. John Braswell, Greg Saulters, and Carolyn Conger (MSU-ES Covington Co.).



## Book Review: The Blueberry Years by Jim Minick

Eric T. Stafne, MSU Fruit Extension Specialist

Earlier this year I was in Oxford, Mississippi. It was a beautiful spring morning and I was a little early for my scheduled talk on fruit crops. Since the weather was so nice and it had been quite some time since I had visited Oxford, I decided to walk downtown and take a look around the square. I had two goals in mind – find the Square Books bookstore and to get a cup of coffee. Luckily, I was able to do both.

While perusing the titles at Square Books, I came across one that interested me. It was called “The Blueberry Years: A Memoir of Farm and Family”. On the cover was a notification that this book was also a winner of the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance (SIBA) best nonfiction book award. I thumbed through the book, read the laudatory blurbs on the cover, and decided to purchase it. Memoirs on specialty crop farming are rare, so I thought I would give this one a try.

The author of this book, Jim Minick, teaches at Radford University, so he is a highly educated man. I found his writing to be engaging for the most part; yet, overly romanticized the experience of being a blueberry grower. For example, he described growing blueberries as being in

“...the church of *Vaccinium corymbosum*, the high order of the highbush, with Berkeley and Nelson serving as deacons, Blueray and Bluecrop members of the choir, and Spartan and Patriot the ushers for the day.”

Although I understood his exuberance at becoming a grower of blueberries, I found this type of saccharine description to be over-the-top. He also invoked words from writers John Keats and Henry David Thoreau to convey the feeling of being a blueberry grower. This is the weakest part of the book, too much romance spent on a task that is not at all romantic. The idealization of farming is something that someone without any experience does (and I see this all the time with new growers) and it shows in this book. However, with that being said, I give the author credit for moving beyond the romance and into the reality. In fact, he does it slowly and skillfully as if the reader is watching a shooting star come into sight, burn brightly, then die, leaving a trail of memories in its wake.

Initially, Jim, and his wife Sarah, are drawn to a simpler life and thus want to be more in control of their own lives. The author states:

“We want to write and make baskets, grow most of our own food, and follow a dream we call homesteading. The farm, we hope, will allow this, and the berries will be our cash crop, our money-maker to pay taxes and other expenses.”

## The Blueberry Years, continued.

As his family had grown blueberries in the past, Sarah considered Jim an expert in his ability to make blueberries their cash crop. He said,

“I think I bleed blue” and

“Genetically, it seems, blueberries have flowed in my family’s blood for several generations.”

These statements seem plausible until the reader finds out that his family members were never blueberry farmers, but rather had  $\frac{1}{4}$  of an acre. At this point I saw his delusion clearly, but it took some time before he saw it too.

Even though I could read between the lines at how the story was going to eventually end, the writing achieves a certain story-telling coziness, as if the reader were sitting in front of the fireplace listening to an uncle recount a story of the Dust Bowl. Early romance later becomes matter-of-fact, but the story is still told with a twinkle of both love and regret.

Slowly, Jim comes to realize that:

“...the answers I searched for often could come only from the field itself and those of us trying to make it something blue, but I didn’t know this at the time. The manuals and experts offered general tips, or told about how they approached a similar problem, but no book could ever be written to tell a farmer how to farm a specific field.”

His comprehension of his new situation is well told. Not all growers come to understand it as well. The field is the teacher and you are the student. The field must be earnestly studied, because it is an ever changing entity. It is a life-long learning course and no one can answer its questions as well as its owner. Once Jim and his wife realize this, their efforts really take off and the field becomes something extraordinary. They begin to see everything in a different way. One day they have an entomologist visit and he looks the bushes over,

“...bush by bush, leaf and berry and twig...”, finding “...a world full of beneficial bugs.”

They are able to see that every bush has its very own environment and needs to be treated as such. It was a turning point to their subsequent management.

The author obviously did quite a bit of research on the history of blueberries as well, citing the work of Dr. Frederick Coville as well as Elizabeth White. If only he had done as much work upfront before he planted the bushes. Now, perhaps he did not go into all the details of the pre-plant investigations that were done and, to be fair, this was before the Internet era. But, as an Extension Specialist, I found it disheartening (yet, not surprising) that he did not forge a strong relationship with his local county extension agent – at least the details of that relationship were suppressed in the book. An Extension agent could have helped with many aspects of things they struggled with in the beginning, and at the end.

## The Blueberry Years, continued

Jim and Sarah are drawn to organically growing the bushes. Jim writes a meditation on organics which I found down-to-earth and refreshing. It is steeped in reality. Although a believer in an organic system, he correctly states that,

“Organic does not necessarily mean that the food was grown in an ecologically, energetically, or socially sustainable way...” and that many organically grown foods are still done in a “...monoculture.”

To sum it all up he makes a statement that effectively characterizes the whole organic food movement.

“So maybe farming organically is getting to the heart of a healthy food system. But we still have a ways to go.”

Even though he puts organics in perspective, many of his customers are more zealous. Jim finds that instead of just growing blueberries, he has gotten into the business of religion.

“The religion is “organic” and whether we like it or not, we’ve created this house of worship.”

He finds himself somewhat torn between the reality and the perception, which I found to be a nice parallel between his reality and initial perception of being a blueberry grower. It is a joy to watch the development of Jim and Sarah as blueberry growers. They start from ground zero and grow into competent, no, excellent growers in a matter of a couple years. They have the verve and desire to learn and that is what keeps them going despite the setbacks. And there are setbacks.

Like many growers in Mississippi this past year, a late spring freeze was a harsh reality. They experienced a nearly total “crop failure” leading to “...an empty field, an empty cash drawer, and a row of empty buckets.” They were reduced to watching the temperature drop and drop and drop as the set flowers buckled under the cold.

“We do the only thing we can: bundle up to worry and watch.”

This devastating freeze event eventually led to the end of Jim and Sarah as blueberry growers. It caused them to do some soul-searching about the blueberry business. In the end they were able to,

“...learn from this field of berries that sometimes beauty and business don’t mix...”

In the beginning the author stated that their desire was to homestead and live off of the earnings of their blueberry field. One of the great mistakes they made was not understanding how many acres they needed to make that a reality. From the very first page I knew this, but it took the author almost 300 pages to figure it out. This is an example of where Cooperative Extension could have helped in a substantial way. One question could have led to a much different outcome.

## The Blueberry Years, continued

“And even though our acre field is four times larger than this Pennsylvania one, it is still not enough. We needed at least four acres of blueberries, I realize now. Four acres to provide enough income to stay home, work where we live, and be real farmers. That size of a dream I never had imagined, never planned for, never knew we needed.”

Unfortunately, the failings lie on both sides. His, for not doing enough research to discover Cooperative Extension and ask the right questions, but also Cooperative Extension for not making itself more well-known. I know this is a common lament of Cooperative Extension.

My favorite part of the book came when Jim finally realized that his one-acre blueberry patch was just a hobby farm. During most of the time he took offense at the idea he was a “hobby farmer.”

“Both hobby farm and farmette imply a certain luxury, activities done in the spare time afforded by wealth made as some off-farm job. For years I knew I did not live on a farmette and I was not a hobby farmer.”

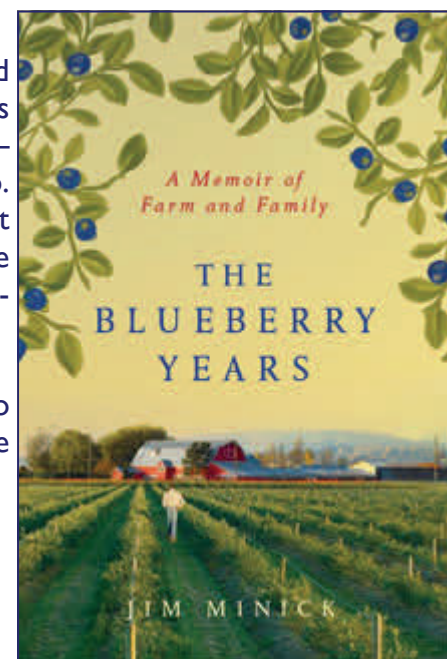
But both he and his wife had other jobs that supported his little farm. He just could not recognize it or didn't want to accept it. In the end though, he came to the conclusion that he was indeed a hobby farmer. What else could a blueberry grower with one acre of plants be? Jim eloquently ends his dream of being a blueberry grower by stating,

“It's okay to quit a cherished dream, especially if quitting opens such a wide door to more time to write and to hike the wooded hills that surround us on our new farm.”

Sometimes, he states that one can love, “...the idea of being a blueberry farmer more than the reality and all its demands.”

I won't give away the whole story, because it is worth reading and giving some thought. It is a very good recollection of what it takes to be a successful blueberry grower – at least on a small scale – although he could have been even better with a little more help. There are a couple small errors that distracted me a little, but probably won't most readers (for example, tendrils and roots are not the same thing, and Southern Highbush blueberries are inter-specific hybrids, not just *Vaccinium darrowii*).

Overall, I thought the book was well done and worth my time to read it. I think you would find it worth yours as well. And with the holiday season coming up, it would fit great in a stocking or two.





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## Opportunity to Provide Feedback

Eric T. Stafne, MSU-ES

This issue represents the final issue for 2013. I have had a lot of fun putting these newsletters together and I hope they are useful and educational for you. As with many of our Cooperative Extension activities, feedback from those receiving information is very important. Therefore I would like to extend this opportunity to all who read this newsletter (and any of the past newsletters) to tell me what you liked about it or what needs to be improved.

Any feedback can be sent to me at [estafne@ext.msstate.edu](mailto:estafne@ext.msstate.edu). I will compile any response that I get and go through it carefully so that the next volume in 2014 is even better.

Thanks for reading the Mississippi Vaccinium Journal.