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For immediate release

Blueberries: A Challenging But Potentially Viable Crop

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PIKETON, Ohio -- Blueberries are not the most popular berry grown in Ohio, but according to the 1997 Agriculture Census for Ohio there are over 200 acres of blueberries grown on over 100 farms throughout Ohio. Most of the blueberries grown in Ohio are sold either through pick-your-own operations, a farm market or a produce auction. The rule of thumb for when blueberries are ready for picking in Ohio is on July 4th. According to Lisa Beilstein, Blueberry Patch Farm, Mansfield, Ohio, the last few years the blueberries have been ready the last week in June but this year with the rain and cool weather it will probably be fairly close to July 4th when they are ready to pick.

Blueberries are a challenging crop to raise due to the need for acidic soils. Few soils in Ohio are just right for blueberries, but adding organic matter and granular copper can amend soils to make blueberries a viable crop. The ideal soil for blueberries has a pH ranging from four to four and a half with four to seven percent organic matter or more. It is suggested that blueberries be grown on raised beds, four feet wide and nine inches high, especially where the soil is a loam or clay loam. The raised bed assists with water drainage.

Blueberry bushes have very shallow root systems and are very sensitive to water fluctuations. They need at least one to two inches of water per week and in Ohio that has not been a problem this year. In dry years irrigation is required to provide the blueberries with sufficient water. One must remember that blueberries are about 90 percent water so as the berry ripens water is required to make it bigger.

In growing blueberries one must be willing to practice patience. Blueberry bushes do not begin producing fruit until their third season and do not become fully productive for about six years. Once in production, the biggest problem with blueberries is birds. Most blueberry bushes must be netted or birds will come in and make a feast of the berries and leave the grower with no crop.

There are three main types of blueberries: highbush, rabbiteye and southern highbush. Only highbush is recommended for Ohio due to our climate. Blueberry trials at the OSU Centers at Piketon have shown the following cultivars produce higher yields in southern Ohio: Bluejay, Herbert, Jersey, Toro and Coville. The cultivars producing the largest berries were Toro, Coville,

Elliott, Bluecrop and Herbert. Highbush blueberries do not require two different cultivars for cross pollination to occur but bigger berries and higher yields will typically result from cross pollination, thus it is desirable to plant at least two different cultivars. Different cultivars also ripen at different times so you can extend your season by planting a mix of early, mid and late season ripening cultivars. More information on growing blueberries can be found at the Ohio State University Extension web site at <http://ohioline.osu.edu> or by contacting your local OSU Extension office.

For those who have never picked blueberries, you may want to plan a trip to a local blueberry farm to pick some healthy, nutritious blueberries. Blueberry Patch Farm in Mansfield offers both pick-your-own or already picked berries as well as children's activities. They offer such activities as Kid's Days with wagon rides, library story hour and a "Biggest Blueberry Picking Contest" for kids 12 and under. These events are typically held in late July. A day on the farm is a great event for children of all ages and of course for moms and dads, too. Make plans now to visit a local blueberry farm to pick some berries. For more information on where blueberry farms are located contact your local OSU Extension office or Sandy Kuhn at the OSU Centers at Piketon at (800) 297-2072.