

## Blueberry Variety Review

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Nourse Farms has been selling blueberry plants to commercial growers for over 15 years. Three years ago we began selling Reka, Bluegold, Chandler and Darrow. Last year we offered Draper and Liberty. This year we are offering Aurora. I will discuss each variety in order of ripening, starting with the earliest.

**Reka**, an early season patented blueberry variety bred in New Zealand, is one of the most adaptable varieties we have seen. The plant is very vigorous, growing well on a wide variety of soils and more tolerant of wetter sites than any of the others. Fruit ripens in similar season to Duke, but the berries have better flavor. Fruit is a dark blue color. Winter hardiness is average, similar to Bluecrop. We have not seen winter injury in zone 5 and would caution growers to trial it before planting large quantities in zone 4. We have had limited supplies, selling out before the first of the year.

**Draper** is another patented variety, released from the Michigan State breeding program. This variety is a new, highly productive, early mid-season cultivar with outstanding fresh market quality berries and excellent machine harvest characteristics. Notable features include exceptional firmness, concentrated ripening, easy release of ripe fruit and loose clusters that bear fruit on the periphery of a strong small stature bush. The berry has excellent post-harvest color retention and superior shelf life. During the past three harvest seasons, Draper was the most impressive cultivar in when evaluated against over 150 other named and advanced selections. It is believed that Draper may be the first cultivar that can be consistently harvested mechanically and shipped fresh. Draper is recommended for both fresh and process growers desiring an improved machine harvested mid-season variety.

**Bluegold** is a mid-season variety that is highly productive, with superior quality berries for midseason. Fruit ripening is concentrated, with harvesting in 1 or 2 picks. The plant grows compact, spreading somewhat, and is cold hardy. All of its fruit ripens within the first two pickings of Bluecrop. The berries are very firm, flavorful and evenly sized. A particularly exciting feature is the concentrated ripening, making Bluegold one of the most economical varieties for hand harvest and a good candidate for mechanical harvesting. We recommend Bluegold for growers desiring a superior quality mid-season berry for fresh or processed sales.

**Chandler** is a mid- to late-season blueberry plant with the largest berry of any available variety on the market today. Chandler will fruit over a period of 4-6 weeks, and has very nice flavor. This new variety is vigorous, with a spreading habit of 5-6 feet. Chandler is probably not hardy enough for the more northern areas. It is recommended for production in areas with milder winters where high-chill varieties do well. It is perfect for U-pick and direct market sales where a hand picked standout berry is needed. Yields have been good to excellent.

**Liberty** is a selection from a Brigitta x Elliott cross and seems to have inherited the best characteristics of both. First harvest is about a week before Elliott, ripening over two to three pickings and finishing before Elliott. The berries are slightly flat with an attractive sky-blue color and outstanding firmness. Liberty is proving to be a fast growing upright bush, with strong potential for high yields during the establishment years. The flavor is reminiscent of Brigitta but the production is notably better. Consistent high yields in Michigan indicate that the buds and wood of Liberty are tolerant to fluctuating late fall and spring temperatures and cold winters to -20°F. We highly recommend Liberty for late season fresh and process markets.

**Darrow** is a late-midseason variety that produces large berries and is highly rated for its flavor. The plant is very vigorous and grows upright. Not recommended for northern areas, Darrow is suited for southern New England and the South. Highly recommended to extend your blueberry season. Darrow is picked 4-6 times through the season, with the first pick yielding fruit that will easily cover a quarter. The slightly tart flavor is outstanding for cooking or eating fresh. Recommended for U-pick and farm sales in zone 5 or higher.

**Aurora** is the latest ripening new release from MSU, offering northern growers an opportunity to extend the fresh fruit season beyond Elliott. Aurora has an extremely high yield capacity. The berries ripen over three to four pickings and average in size about 25% larger than Elliott with a slightly darker color. Heavy rains during the 2004 harvest season showed Aurora to be more resistant to cracking than most varieties. The post-harvest problems that can plague Elliott do not seem to be apparent with Aurora. Aurora berries can be tart and must be harvested when fully ripe. Early reports indicate that the flavor is superior to Elliott. We recommend Aurora for growers where a cold hardy, hand harvest berry is desired to extend the fresh market harvest season.

To conclude, I would recommend growers try some of each of these varieties to see which fit their production systems. Large quantities of these varieties won't be available for several years. Knowing current plant supplies, I foresee that the demand will not be met for several years. We have sold out of these varieties as soon as November. For the last 2 years all of our plants have been sold out by April. Planning a planting and ordering early will help ensure growers get the plants they want.