

## TESTING BLACKBERRY VARIETIES AT HOPE

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Open just about any nursery catalog that sells fruit trees and berry plants, and you will likely see several blackberry varieties on sale with Native American names such as Navaho, Arapaho, Apache, Ouachita, or Natchez. Many of these varieties have been planted in gardens, back yards, U-Pick operations and commercial production fields nationwide, and make up the vast majority of the blackberries that are grown around the world in any given year. What many Arkansans don't know, however, is that all blackberry varieties with Native American names that are on the market today originated in Arkansas and were developed and patented by horticulturalists at the University of Arkansas. And interestingly, for the last 50 years, one of the first places these promising new varieties were tested has been at the Southwest Research and Extension Center (also known as the Experiment Station) in Hope. "Annual blackberry variety trials have been going on at our station for many years," said Center Director Dr. Victor Ford. "The objective of these trials has been to help our fruit breeders decide which of their selections are good enough to become varieties and which are not," he continued.

"The newest innovation in blackberries has been the discovery, development and release of three unique varieties that are called primocane-fruiting types because they bear their fruit on the current year's canes," says Qingfang Chen, horticulture program associate at the Center. Dr. John Clark, horticulturalist and fruit breeder with the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture discovered these unusual plants a few years ago at the University of Arkansas Fruit Research Station in Clarksville. He developed and released two patented varieties, Prime-Jim and Prime-Jan in 2004. For those who may not be familiar with blackberry growth habits, here is a little background. Traditional blackberries produce their fruit in the late spring and early summer only on second-year canes – canes that grew the season before, but had no fruit known as floricanes. The new primocane varieties, however, have the ability to produce fruit in the fall on the first year canes, called primocanes as well as on the floricanes the next spring. This characteristic can be very attractive both to home gardeners and to commercial blackberry producers because growers can enjoy fresh berries both from early fall until frost, and in the spring and early summer the following year. Unfortunately, these types don't like hot weather very much, and variety trial yield results from Hope as well as other southern locations in the U.S. indicate that berry yield in the fall on the primocanes is somewhat lower than that in cooler climates. "The berry quality, however, is very good for these varieties," says Qingfang Chen, horticulture program associate at the Hope Center. "I just sampled a few of them this morning, and they certainly were good! The only complaint that I get from Arkansas homeowners who have tried them is that both Prime-Jim and Prime-Jan are thorny varieties," she went on. The newest primocane-fruiting variety to be developed is Prime-Ark 45, which was recently patented by the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture and released this month to licensed nurseries for sale to the public.

Whether wild or “tame, thornless or thorny, blackberry production and the blackberry cobbler they produce have a long history in Arkansas. Testing, evaluating, and helping to develop improved, new blackberry varieties has been an ongoing part of the Southwest Research and Extension Center program for longer than most of us can remember. “Folks in this region who are interested in growing blackberries have a definite advantage, and a real resource close at hand,” said Ford. “Remember, when a new variety becomes available to the general public, it is very likely that we will already have several years of data and practical experience growing it under Southwest Arkansas conditions, and our job is to share this information and experience with anyone who is interested ,” he concluded. For more information, contact the Southwest Research and Extension Center at (870)777-9702 or your local County Extension Agent at (870)777-5771..



