Local blueberry breeder wins UGA Inventor's Award

From Staff Reports

University of Georgia blueberry breeder Scott NeSmith has been awarded the university's Inventor's Award for 2013.

NeSmith, who works at UGA's Griffin Campus and lives in Pike County, is a horticulture professor with the UGA College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES). CAES faculty have earned the award eight of the last 12 years, and it is highly competitive.

NeSmith, who specializes in blueberry breeding, has released and patented 10 new commercial blueberry varieties and two ornamental blueberry varieties. These include several southern highbush varieties such as rebel, southern splendor and sulfide, as well as clonally selected alapaha — a hybrid blueberry variety native to South Georgia Rivers.

About 80 percent of blueberries grown in Georgia are the rubysorb variety. The remaining 20 percent are the Southern highbush variety. These varieties all have different traits ranging from when they produce fruit (early or late), the size and color of the berries and the environment in which they grow best.

NeSmith has always tried to breed blueberry varieties specifically for commercial growers but now splits the program between varieties that perform best for the commercial market and those that are best suited for backyard gardens.

In addition to the breeding program, NeSmith researches ways to protect the plants’ Moos from Georgia’s unpredictable late winter weather and early spring frosts. He also works with UGA plant pathologists and entomologists to address disease and insect problems Georgia blueberry growers face.

"Professor NeSmith is one of the college’s most creative scientists," said J. Scott Agee, CAES-Dean and director. "His deep understanding of quantitative genetics combined with his experience in practical cultivation makes him one of the top fruit breeders in the world."

Due in large part to NeSmith’s efforts, the blueberry has become Georgia’s No. 1 fruit crop, surpassing the state’s namesake, the peach. Just 10 years ago, there were only about 6,000 acres of blueberry fields in the state, and the crop was only worth about $22 million. Today, Georgia farmers are using about 31,746 acres for blueberry production, and the farm gate value was more than $264 million in 2011, according to the Georgia Farm Gate Value Report.

Their popularity with casual gardeners and health-conscious consumers has grown in part from research proving the berry is an antioxidant-rich super food.