

Tasty Summertime Blueberries

by Brandy Cowley-Gilbert

Summer brings a bounty of fruits ripening in our gardens, and blueberries are one of our favorites. Nothing beats the experience of standing in a beautiful garden and popping sun ripened blueberries into your mouth, it's like eating liquid sunshine. Beside the fact they're tasty; blueberries are a nutritional powerhouse packed with more cancer-fighting, anti-aging, eyesight-saving and disease-fighting antioxidants than foods like spinach and salmon.

Easy to grow blueberries are a tasty and attractive addition to the landscape. These durable, low-maintenance shrubs have a unique misty blue cast and are truly beautiful in all seasons. In spring, dainty, bell-like white blooms cover reddish canes. Flowers are followed by blue-tinged foliage and huge clusters of powder blue fruit. In autumn they make a brilliant show as they turn from orange to scarlet to fiery red. Mixing blueberries into your landscape is easy.

If you're a gardener who grows mainly flowers, you may not have thought of it, but blueberry bushes take no more room than a typical azalea or rosebush and are less work than either. They can be grown in half-barrels on a balcony or patio, as long as you have two of them to ensure pollination. They make an excellent hedging plant beautiful in all seasons.

Here in North Florida we are fortunate to be sandwiched between two major blueberry breeding Universities. The University of Florida in Gainesville is world renowned for their efforts in breeding rabbiteye and southern highbush blueberries suited for low chill regions, and the University of Georgia continuously cranks out some of the best flavored and most well adapted berries for our region. Look for Georgia's new releases Vernon and Ochlockonee; these tend to bloom late to escape the late freezes.

The array of varieties that grow well in our climate is amazing. With careful selection of six to eight plants it is possible to have ripe fruit from early May though late July. If you'd like to store some in the freezer to enjoy all winter pick one of the many berries that have been bred for commercial production and have concentrated ripening season and super heavy production. Here's a link to a great IFAS publication that delves into the varieties suited for our climate <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/hs215>

Blueberry Growing Guide

- Blueberries need a sunny location, an acidic free-draining fertile soil, avoid water logged soils, heavy clay soils are problematic. If faced with these conditions plant in a raised bed above ground or grow your plants in containers.
- If planting a hedge, space plants approx four to six feet apart. For maximum fill out rototill in two to three inches of peat moss into the top soil.
- Plant two different varieties together to insure cross pollination. Each group requires a pollinator from within the group—you must plant at least two varieties of rabbiteye or two varieties of southern highbush.
- Only use acid type fertilizers and soil amendments in the planting hole. Mushroom compost, manure, or fertilizers that contain nitrates can sicken or kill your plants.
- When plants are young, remove all of the flowers to encourage more leaf and plant growth. Young plants have a tendency to over-produce, limiting the plants growth and establishment. It's really best to remove all the fruit the first year.
- Water well through dry periods to ensure the fruit sets well. Plants are easily lost to drought the first years. Apply a heavy mulch of leaves or pine bark to insure a cool moist place for the roots to thrive.
- As plants ages, thin out $\frac{1}{4}$ of the oldest canes each year. This will insure a good production of new canes that will fruit heavily.
- If bird are a problem cover with bird netting before the berries turn color.
- Blueberries are ideal for growing in containers. For best production plant in at least a twenty inch container and use a potting soil that contains peat and ground bark.

Planting a few blueberries amongst the flowers is a sure way to provide a steady supply of healthful fruit for your family as well as a sweet surprise to your summertime garden visits.

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