

JUST FRUITS

AND EXOTICS

BLUEBERRY

INTRODUCTION

Native throughout most of the eastern United States, blueberries are one of the easiest and most rewarding fruits the homeowner can grow. The bushes require a little effort to establish, but once rooted are very disease and drought resistant; most fruit their second year. Thanks to recent breeding programs at the Universities of Florida and Georgia, we now have a wide range of varieties to choose from, making it possible to have delicious blueberries from early May to late July! We attend many blueberry seminars throughout the year so we are always up on the latest and most practical techniques to help you with site evaluation, soil preparation, correct planting procedures and maintenance of your blueberry patch!

USES IN LANDSCAPE

Anywhere you want a hedge, think of blueberries first. 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. If you want a short thick hedge, tetraploids grow more slowly and can be sheared. Rabbit-eye varieties make a nice thick hedge anywhere from 6-20 feet high. Use blueberries to line a driveway or walkway or as backdrop hedges. In the garden, line a fence with blueberries for luscious fruit that doesn't take much space and is always lovely. Choose varieties with different ripening times to spread the fruiting season. Blueberries can also be trained into fountain-shaped shrubs or small trees. Some varieties do well as container plants for a patio gardener.

PLANTING + CULTURE

SITE SELECTION

Well-drained sandy loam soils are preferred, but blueberries will grow on many soil types if good drainage is provided. Blueberries will grow more vigorously and produce more fruit in full sun. Avoid frost pockets – late season frosts can damage fruit production in early-flowering varieties.

SOIL PREPARATION AND PLANTING

Blueberries require acid soil (pH 4.5-5.5). If you are in doubt about the acidity of your soil, take a soil sample to the Cooperative Extension Agent in your county for a soil test. Blueberries will not grow well in soils with a pH above 5.5. Adjust soil acidity as necessary with powdered sulfur and iron sulfate. Do NOT use aluminum sulfate, as this material is toxic to blueberries. For individual plants, sulfur a 6 x 6 foot area around the plant. Hedgerows need to be sulfured in a 3 foot wide band down the row. In the area you plan to put blueberries, it is advisable to till in some form of acidic organic matter like ground rotted pine bark or oak leaves. Dig a planting hole approximately three times the width of the pot and at the same depth as the root ball. Enrich the planting hole with peat moss mixed with soil dug from the hole (50/50 mix). Do NOT use mushroom compost or manure in the planting hole or as mulch. You can make your plants sick and even kill them with manure or mushroom compost. Remove the blueberry bush from the pot, gently loosen the root ball and place in the planting hole. To avoid burying too deep, make sure the plant is positioned with the top most roots at the soil line. Fill the planting hole with the mix of soil and peat moss; gently tamp it in. Water thoroughly to settle the roots and eliminate air pockets. Do NOT put fertilizer in the planting hole. Only apply fertilizer if it is the correct time of year (see Fertilization section below). If desired, construct a water basin around the base of the bush approximately 36 inches in diameter. Blueberries are very shallowly rooted, like azaleas. Mulch in spring and fall with approximately 4-6 inches of acid mulch (pine bark, oak leaves). Pull mulch a couple of inches away from the trunk for good air circulation. Do NOT mulch with mushroom compost. Spacing for blueberries depends upon the desired use in the landscape. Bushes can be planted individually or in a hedgerow. If planting a hedgerow, space 5-6 feet apart with rows 10-12 feet apart. If planting bushes individually, place plants for cross pollination no more than 10 feet apart. Remove all flowers the first year to encourage more growth.

FERTILIZATION

The type of fertilizer you choose may be chemical or organic. Make sure that the fertilizer contains iron, zinc, manganese, magnesium, molybdenum, copper and boron. These minor elements are very important to plants and most soils are low in these elements. Application rates vary according to age of plant. See chart below:

Starter Fertilizer & Soil (Apply at Planting)	Fertilizer to Maintain (Apply Early March, Late May, & Late July)
Espoma Bio-tone® Starter Plus Mix Peat Moss in Soil	Espoma Holly-tone®

Notes:

- Follow Instructions on Bag for how much to apply each time.
- Months to Fertilize vary based on your zone. Fertilize 3 times per year. We recommend the 1st fertilization starting after the last Freeze of the winter (Late February/Early March in zone 8) & the last Fertilization being no later than August or even June/July in some of the colder zones 7 & below.)
- Fertilizing too late in the year in colder climates will promote new growth, which will be subject to freeze damage.

See our “Planting a Tree Correctly” Guide & Espoma Bio-tone® and Tree-tone® Fact Sheets on our website for more info.

Be careful to spread the fertilizer evenly over the blueberry’s root zone and water it in well. Blueberries form suckers and the plant expands each year, the amount of fertilizer applied increases each year until the 4th year after planting. In Zones 8-9 fertilize 3 times each year in late February, late May and late July/early August. Never fertilize after August as this will promote new growth late in the year which will be subject to freeze damage. If your young blueberry plants aren’t growing, they may be stalled. In that event, supplement your fertilizer with a liquid fertilizer for Azalea/Camellias (like Miracid). Treat them once a week for a month. If they still haven’t grown 6 inches, continue the treatment. Blueberries need to double in size the first year in the ground or they will be stunted.

INSECT + DISEASE

Blueberries have few disease or insect problems. Occasionally caterpillars can be a problem and may be controlled with products containing Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*).

WATER

The first year is a critical time for the establishment of a new blueberry bush. Water thoroughly twice a week on light soils and once a week on clay soils. Soak the entire root system deeply – this usually takes 45-60 minutes. Established bushes should receive at least 1 inch of water each week. Because blueberries are very shallowly rooted, we strongly recommend that irrigation be installed root zone. Soaker hoses can be used in a punch. Water regularly, especially during dry periods. Keep an area approximately 4 feet in diameter around the bush clear of grass and weeds to minimize for water and nutrients. Mulch this area with pine bark or leaves.

PRUNING

Routine pruning of blueberries is unnecessary until plants are 4 years old. During this time, remove dead, damaged or diseased limbs. Cut any leggy growth so the plant will bush up. Make all cuts flush with the limb or the next largest branch. Do not leave stubs. For established rabbiteye blueberries, approximately one quarter of the oldest canes are pruned each year to encourage cane renewal. Three to four year-old canes have maximum fruit production, declining with age. Blueberries can be lightly topped right after fruit harvest to hold down the height of the plant. All heavy thinning cuts should be made in the dormant season.

VARIETIES

Blueberries require cross pollination. Thus we always have to plant at least two varieties to ensure good fruit set. Two groups of blueberries are available. Rabbiteye blueberries were developed from native rabbiteye blueberries. They grow as shrubs and will reach 6-20 feet. Their ripening season is from May to July. Tetraploid (Southern Highbush) blueberries are a new development - a cross between Rabbiteye and Northern Highbush blueberries. Everything is different about them. They are smaller, slower-growing and have thicker, more crinkly leaves. Most important, they extend the blueberry season by ripening heavy crops at the very start of the blueberry season. Tetraploids require some extra fruit thinning to achieve a balance between plant size and healthy fruit production. Each group requires a pollinator from within the group—you must plant at least two varieties of rabbiteye or two varieties of tetraploid. A full list of varieties is available online: www.JustFruitsandExotics.com