

How to Grow Blueberries

Along with lip-smacking sweetness, flower and foliage are also worthy reasons to grow blueberries. White, bell-shaped blossoms make a lovely addition to a spring garden and fiery scarlet foliage adds drama to a fading autumn landscape. In addition to taste and appearance, blueberries are ripe with medical advantages; they help lower cholesterol and studies suggest that blueberries also reduce the risk of some cancers.

Types of Blueberries

1. **Highbush blueberries** (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) are those usually found in the produce department of your grocery. As you might expect, they are named because the bushes grow to 6-feet in height. Fruits are large, from ½ to an inch in diameter. Depending on variety, highbush blueberries are hardy from Zones 4 through 11.
2. **Lowbush blueberries** (*Vaccinium angustifolium*) generally reach no more than 18-inches in height. Propagated from shoots spread through underground runners, lowbush blueberries form low mats of plants that produce best on a two-year cycle. The first year is the growth year and the second year is the fruiting year. The sweet, quarter-inch fruits of lowbush blueberries commonly are known as *Wild Blueberries* and are hardy in Zones 3 through 6.
3. **Half-high blueberries** (*V. corymbosum* x *V. angustifolium*) are a hybrid between lowbush and highbush cultivars. Although shorter than high-bush blueberries, half-high grow in much the same way as their taller relatives. Taste and size meet halfway between highbush and lowbush. An extra advantage for the northern grower is that half-high blueberries were especially bred to withstand the heavy snowfalls and cold winters of inland North America and are hardy to Zone 3.
4. **Rabbiteye blueberries** (*Vaccinium ashei*), native to the Southeastern United States, are the tallest of the blueberry bushes, reaching up to 10-feet in height. Because of their thick skins, rabbiteye blueberries are able to withstand southern heat in zones seven through nine.

Site Selection

All types of blueberries grow best in full sun. Plants tolerate partial shade, but production declines as shade increases. Blueberries are shallow rooted and poor competitors against large rooted trees, shrubs, and weeds that compete for water, nutrients, and crowd airways necessary to good blueberry production.

The most important element in growing blueberries is soil composition. To make the most of your blueberry planting, begin necessary soil amendments the year before planting. Blueberries grow best in loose, sandy loam. Although you may run across wild blueberries growing in a bog, on closer inspection you'll see that plants grow on small, natural hills.

Blueberries need moisture retentive, well-drained, humus-rich soil with good aeration. Soil acidity is also very important in growing blueberries. Plants need a pH of 4.0 to no more than 5.0 to thrive. Initially, bring the pH down to acceptable levels with sulphur or 4 to 6 inches of acid peat mixed into the first 6 to 8 inches of topsoil. Also, enrich soil with good organic compost.

Planting blueberries

Although most blueberries self-pollinate, plant two or more varieties within a type for a larger harvest of more voluptuous fruits. Five plants provide enough blueberries for fresh eating, drying, and preserving for a family of four.

Plant blueberries in spring after all danger of frost passes. When growing several plants, you may find it easier to prepare a bed rather than digging holes for individual plants. Add a generous portion of peat moss to your trench or hole both to increase the organic content and to ensure continued soil acidity.

Standard spacing for highbush, half-high, and rabbiteye bushes is five to six feet apart in rows eight to ten feet distant. Dig holes or make your row three to four inches deeper than the size of the root balls. Pack soil firmly around the roots of each plant.

Plant lowbush varieties one to three feet apart in rows three to four feet distant. Cover about a third of the top stems with soil to encourage runners to develop.

Once established, a blueberry bush may remain productive for decades with just a minimum of care.

Blueberry care

Blueberry bushes need at least one inch of water per week. However, tap water can raise the pH of soil and may also contain trace minerals that damage blueberry roots. When rainfall isn't plentiful, the solution to watering blueberries is to use saved rainwater whenever possible and only use tap water when absolutely necessary. A two to three inch mulch of wood chips, sawdust, oak leaves, or shredded bark also helps maintain soil acidity and conserve moisture.

Avoid fertilizers that make soil alkaline. Also, avoid using concentrated fertilizers, since they may burn the roots of your plants. Soybean or cottonseed meal, at 2 pounds per 100 square feet, is ideal. Alternatively, small plantings benefit from fertilization with an organic azalea fertilizer or one specially formulated for acid-loving plants.

Your new planting will likely not blossom until the second year. During the first blossoming year, you need to remove all blossoms. This allows your bushes to become firmly established and develop healthier root systems that result in stronger plants overall. In addition, blossom removal from tall types of blueberries encourages vegetative growth that develops the canopy needed to support heavy harvests in later years.

Diseases and Pests

Possibly the biggest pests to blueberries are the birds we work so hard to attract to our gardens. Birds love blueberries and can quickly eat an entire crop of an unprotected planting. Protect blueberries from birds with bird proof netting.

Draping a net over each bush offers some protection, but birds still may fly under the nets. Since blueberries ripen over a period of three weeks, the ideal protection for your bushes is a walk-in blueberry cage, which is a light frame built around your bushes. The frame serves as a support for the net and also lets you secure the net to block off all entrances to birds, still allowing room to enter and harvest your blueberries. Completely remove the net after harvest.

Young branches of blueberry bushes are also a wintertime delicacy for rabbits and other small rodents. A simple fence of chicken wire can curtail their activity. However, be sure the fence is tall enough to keep small animals out when snow is deep.

Insects are generally not a problem and most diseases can be easily prevented with careful pruning.

Pruning

All blueberries can produce an annual crop, but yields from **lowbush** cultivars are better when the berries are grown in a two-year cycle. The easiest way to prune lowbush blueberries is to mow them to the ground after harvest. However, this means that you only have fruit every other year. The work-around is to divide your planting into two or more sections and mow a different section each year.

A hidden advantage to mowing lowbush blueberries is that because stems form fewer branches, fruit can be raked from them and easily gathered at harvest time.

Tall types of blueberry bushes need an annual pruning. Your basic objectives in pruning are:

- **To remove dead and diseased areas.**
- **To maintain the most vigorous and productive stems.**
Blueberries blossom in the second year from buds formed in the previous year. Even so, weaker stems need culling to allow more vigorous stems to be their most productive. Blueberries also tend to be over-achievers. Although it's hard to believe you could have too many, over production leads to weaker plants and smaller berries.
- **To stimulate new growth.**
As stems age, their production decreases. Lop old growth off at ground level when stems are over an inch in diameter. Also, remove crowded areas from the centers of your bushes to keep the plants from self-shading.

Knowing when blueberries are ripe is a ticklish situation... tickle the clusters and fully ripe berries easily fall into your hands!

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