

Growing Blueberries

Why Grow Blueberries?

- *Edible:* eat berries fresh; use in pies & other desserts; freeze, dry or can them for later use.
- *Long fruiting season:* it extends from late June through September.
- *Long-lived:* Highbush blueberries, deciduous shrubs, live 40 to 50 years.
- *Attractive plants:* white or pink blossoms in spring, colorful fall foliage, and attractive bark in winter.

Selecting a Cultivar

- *Plant more than one cultivar:* cross-pollination produces larger berries & lengthens the harvest season.
- *Examples of blueberries grown in home gardens (in order of ripening):* Duke, Earliblue, Spartan, Patriot, Bluecrop, Jersey, Blueray, Legacy, Chandler and Elliot.

Selecting a Site

- *Place in a sunny location:* Avoid areas surrounded by trees that compete for water and nutrients, and that interfere with air movement around the plants.

Preparing the Soil

- Acid soil of pH 4.5 to 5.5 is ideal; test your soil to determine pH and lower pH with sulfur as needed.
- Improve drainage and add organic matter, such as Douglas-fir sawdust or bark.

Establishing Your Planting

- *Timing:* Plant healthy, 2-year old plants in October or March through April.
- *How:* Set plants no more than $\frac{3}{4}$ inch deeper than they were grown in the container. Tamp soil lightly to remove air pockets, and water thoroughly. To encourage root growth, prune off flower buds in year one, and reduce fruit production in year two.

Weed Control

- Keep at least a 4-foot area around the plants free of weeds during the growing season.
- Blueberries have shallow roots. To prevent damage, keep cultivation very shallow and not too close to the plant.

Mulching

- Mulch keeps the soil cool, conserves moisture, suppresses weeds, adds organic matter, and improves soil structure and acidity.
- After planting, apply a mulch of Douglas fir sawdust or bark to a depth of 2 to 3 inches.
- Increase the depth of the mulch to 6 inches over a period of years.
- You may have to apply 25 percent more nitrogen fertilizer on mulched plantings, depending on how fresh the sawdust. Fresh sawdust “ties up” nitrogen while it decomposes, so you need to add more for the plants to grow properly.

Fertilizing

- *Types:* ammonium sulfate, rhododendron fertilizer, urea

- *Application:* Sprinkle the fertilizer evenly within 12 to 18 inches of each plant, not directly on the crown or stems. The following chart explains the fertilizer usage using ammonium sulfate.
Planting year: 1 ounce of ammonium sulfate per plant in late April, repeat in early June and in late July.
Year 2: 1.2 ounces of ammonium sulfate per plant in April, May and June.
Year 3: 1.4 ounces of ammonium sulfate per plant in April, May and June.
Year 4 & thereafter: 4 ounces of ammonium sulfate per plant in April, May and June.

Watering

- Blueberry roots are close to the surface. They need an adequate water supply from blossom until the fall rains arrive. Drip irrigation or another form of under-canopy irrigation is ideal.

Pruning

- *Timing:* Minimal pruning is needed the first 5 to 6 years. Older plants are pruned every winter, January to early March.
- *How:* Remove old wood; promote the growth of strong, new wood to maintain good fruit production.

The following step-by-step system will make pruning easier:

1. Cut out any wood that's dead, damaged, or diseased.
2. Remove whips smaller than pencil size in diameter, but leave larger whips to develop into good fruiting wood.
3. Cut out one or two old, unproductive canes. Fourth-year or older wood with small, weak growth is unproductive. Cut these canes back to the ground or to a strong new whip growing near the base.
4. Remove excess whips and weak, twiggy wood –especially from the top of the plant –to allow light to reach the center.
5. Some plants do not produce many whips from the base of the plant. Instead they produce whips higher up on an old cane. These bushes will have fewer canes at the base but more new growth or renewal wood higher up on the bush. Follow the same principles described above.

Pests

- *Birds:* Scare tactics have limited effectiveness; netting built on frames over plants will effectively deter the birds.
- In general, insects and diseases are not a big problem for blueberries. Possible problems are *Botrytis*, *Pseudomonas*, mummy berry, root weevils and scale.

OSU Extension Service Resources

Visit your OSU Extension Service office at 200 Warner-Milne Road, Oregon City, for these publications, or get them online at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog>

Growing Blueberries in your home garden EC 1304

Blueberry Cultivars for Oregon EC 1308

Pruning Highbush Blueberries (video)

Sustainable Gardening Handbook EM 8742

Master Gardener™ Advice

- Call Home Horticulture Helpline: 503-655-8631 (Clackamas County), 503-821-1150 (Washington County), or 503-445-4608 (Multnomah County).
- For more 10-Minute University™ handouts and class schedule, visit www.cmastergardeners.org or www.metromastergardeners.org.
- Look for Master Gardeners at area Farmers' Markets.