

Starting Right with Blueberries

Blueberries offer a unique combination of delicious fruit and striking ornamental beauty to the garden and landscape. Blueberries are easy to grow, require little care, and are seldom bothered by pests. Follow these few basic steps and your blueberry plants will thrive and last a lifetime.

Varieties. Blueberries come in a wide variety. Choose varieties that are suitable for your climate and ripening season. Select varieties that ripen at different times so you have fresh fruit to extend throughout the season. Large fruiting varieties are best eaten fresh or for desserts. Small fruit varieties are best for muffins, pancakes or freezing. For blueberry lovers, allow at least two plants per family member. Brilliant fall color and growth habits offer the gardener lots of choices to use throughout the landscape.

Site Selection and Preparation. Select a sunny location with well drained, humus enriched soil. For best results select an area where irrigation water is available. Keep the root zone moist throughout the growing season results in larger, sweeter fruit. Raised beds (3-4' wide and 8-12" high) work very well for areas where the soil is poor or has poor drainage.

Incorporate coir or peat moss into the planting medium for a fail safe way to grow blueberries in almost any soil. Work your planting area approximately 2 ½' in diameter and one foot deep. Remove 1/3 to 1/2 of the soil. Add an equal amount of pre-moistened peat moss and mix well. One 4 cubic foot compressed bale will usually be sufficient for 4-5 plants. For raised beds mix equal volumes peat moss with acid compost or planting mix. Blueberries thrive in acidic soils. Your garden center representative can recommend a soil acidifier if necessary for your area.

Spacing. Blueberries can be planted as close as 2 ½' apart to form solid hedgerows or spaced up to 6' apart and grown as individual specimens. When planting in rows allow 8 to 10' between the rows depending on equipment used for mowing or cultivating.

Planting. For container stock, remove from pot and lightly roughen up the outside surface of the root ball. Set the top soil line of the plant about 1-2" higher than the existing ground and firm around root ball. Mound the soil up along the sides of the exposed root mass and water in thoroughly.

For bare root plants, spread roots out wide and shallow, cover with ½" of soil. Firm soil around roots and water well.

Mulching. Add 2 to 4" mulch over the roots to conserve moisture, prevent weeds and add organic matter. Bark mulch, acid compost, sawdust, grass clippings, etc. all work well. Repeat every other year.

Pruning. It is important that blueberries get established before allowing them to bear fruit. Thereafter, they should be heavily pruned each year to avoid over fruiting which results in small fruit or poor growth.

1. Remove all blooms as they appear the first year. In years thereafter, follow these steps after the leaves have dropped.
2. Remove low growth around the base. If it doesn't grow up, it gets pruned out!
3. Remove the dead wood, and non-vigorous twiggy wood. Select for bright colored wood with long (at least 3") laterals. Remove blotchy colored short growth.

If 1/3 to 1/2 of the wood has not been removed by the above steps, thin out the fruiting laterals and small branches until this balance has been obtained.

Fertilizing. Blueberries like acid fertilizers such as Rhododendron or Azalea formulations. For newly planted stock, use 2 tablespoons of 10-20-10 or similar fertilizer in late spring or once plants are established. **Careful** - Blueberries are very sensitive to over fertilization! Make certain that plants are watered well **before and after** fertilizing. Apply in early spring and again in late spring for best results.

For organic fertilizers, blood meal and cottonseed meal work well. Avoid using fresh manures as they can burn.