

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 1/2 to an inch in diameter. Depending on variety, highbush blueberries are hardy from Zones 4 through 11.

2. **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. 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.

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 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.