



Blueberries

Blueberries are one of only a few native North American fruits now grown as cultivated plants. This gives them the advantage of being relatively disease and pest free compared to many other fruits. For home gardeners they require a little more effort but are well worth it. Fresh blueberries will give any huckleberry a run for taste!

Blueberries have some very specific site and soil requirements. The shrubs have a very shallow and extensive root system that is sensitive to compression. Blueberries should not be planted near frequently used paths because constant foot traffic can actually be too much for them. Planting the shrubs too close to the edge of a bed where a riding lawn mower will pass by weekly may cause the roots to suffer damage. Blueberries require a large bed where the roots can really spread out. Plant Land recommends minimum spacing of 3 feet per bush and up to 5 feet is considered optimal.

Planting blueberries requires preparation of a large bed since all the soil in the root zone should be good quality to a depth of 1 foot. Amend soil with a mix of ½ compost or well rotted manure to ½ peat moss. Blueberries need acidic soil that is rich in organic matter. We strongly recommend that you test your soil pH before you attempt to grow blueberries. If your soil is below 4.0pH you may need to amend and treat the soil for a season before you plant blueberry bushes.

Like all fruit shrubs blueberries need full sun, up to 6 hours a day and require good drainage. Here in Montana it is also advisable to plant blueberries where they will have some shelter from harsh winter winds. Because they are highly ornamental shrubs especially in fall with bright red leaves, foundation flower beds next to the house can be optimal sites for a blueberry patch. They will happily grow close to other shrubs or perennials. It can also be a good idea to wrap blueberry shrubs in winter with burlap much as we do roses or rhododendrons. Plant Land's garden experts offer complete information on winter wrapping each fall.

Blueberries are typically sold as potted plants. The large root system is too susceptible to damage to sell bareroot as a rule. When you remove the plant from the pot loosen the roots as much as possible so you can spread them out in the planting hole. Plant the shrub at the same depth it was in the pot. Be sure to water new plants generously and keep them well watered all season. Deep watering during fruiting helps sugar production for sweeter fruit. Blueberries should never be allowed to dry out. Fine roots will wither and die in a very short time and a plant that has to constantly re-grow roots isn't going to be able to make much fruit!

Blueberries require cross pollinating. This means you need two different types of blueberries for fruit to form. In the list you will see that some are listed as partially self-fertile. You will get berries but you would get more berries with another shrub. All the varieties Plant Land sells work to pollinate each other.

Do not prune or fertilize at planting time. For the first season, pinch off any blossoms that form. This will encourage the plant to put its energy into roots rather than fruit production. Mulch in the form of wood chips or grass clippings is a good idea. It will help to keep the shallow roots cool which the plants prefer. Blueberries need to be kept weed free. Mulch helps to keep down weeds, keep moisture in and offers some protection from light foot traffic.

Do not prune your blueberry bushes for several seasons. Because they fruit on old wood, they need to be allowed to produce fruiting wood for a few years first. Pruning is done in early spring on dormant plants. Remove unproductive, older branches first and then make selective cuts at shooting buds to encourage branching. Light pruning is best done annually. The best fruit is produced on vigorous branches. Encourage this type of growth by pruning out branches that are older than six years.

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Test soil each spring. A yearly application of powdered sulfur or aluminum sulfate is recommended to maintain soil pH. Blueberries commonly show magnesium deficiency. When you chose a fertilizer for your plants, try to find one that includes 3% magnesium to avoid this problem. Simple epon salts are also a good source of magnesium. A yearly application of 1-2 tablespoons per plant each spring is a good idea. Avoid fertilizers that contain potassium chloride as blueberries can be sensitive to it.

Blueberry bushes are typically productive for many, many years. Once they reach 8-9 years old, they are at their peak for production. At some time after that point, they may begin to require more detailed pruning to maintain production and possibly even need drastic pruning to rejuvenate very old plants.

While very few pests and diseases bother blueberries, be sure to treat any that do promptly. A plant weakened by disease or pests will be less productive and much more susceptible to winter kill. As with any plant that produces edible fruit, be careful about what products you chose to use. Plant Land can provide both diagnosis and help choosing a remedy.

Plant Land's Blueberry Varieties

Northcountry: This is a sibling of Northsky, introduced in 1988 with plants that are larger and more productive. The fruit is up to ½" in diameter with a sweet, mild flavor. **Mature plants reach 18-24" high.** It is partially self fertile. Hardy to **Zone 4.**

NorthBlue: This **24" high low-growing**, compact "half-high" plant produces crops of delicious, dime-size, dark-blue berries. Tolerates temperatures as low as -30°F. Mid-season. Introduced in 1983. Cold-hardy. Ripens in July. Self-pollinating, but will yield larger crops if pollinated with another blueberry.

Chandler: This is a mid to late season blueberry plant with the largest berry of any available variety on the market today. Chandler will fruit over a period of 4-6 weeks and has a sweet flavor. **Mature plants reach a height of 4-5. Zone 4.**

Bluecrop: Introduced in 1952. Highbush; midseason. Standards of excellence. Medium to large, open clusters of large, firm, crack resistant, light blue fruit. High quality fruit with good subacid flavor. Bluecrop is good for fresh eating, preserves, baking and freezing. Vigorous, upright growth will reach **4-6 feet at maturity**. Slender light red canes. **Zone 4**

Blueray: Introduced from the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station in 1955. Highbush; early-midseason. This variety is an old favorite. Small, tight clusters of large, medium blue fruit. Soft, firm skin of Blueray resists cracking. Excellent quality berries with a sweet, slightly tart, aromatic flavor. Vigorous and very productive, this bush will grow **4 - 6 feet tall at maturity**. Bright red wood in the winter. **Zone 4**

EarliBlue: An early variety of highbush blueberry that will **grow 4 – 6 tall at maturity**, with crops of sweet light blue fruit in early summer, bell-shaped flowers, an upright habit and showy red stems. It produces large clusters of blue round berries which are usually ready for picking in early summer. The berries have a sweet taste and a juicy texture. **Zone 4**