

Pruning

Pruning is the most important aspect of blueberry culture. Annual pruning is necessary to invigorate the bushes, encourage annual fruit production, and prevent the bushes from overbearing. Until the bushes reach maturity (at about eight years old) remove only dead, broken, short or weak shoots. On mature bushes remove one-third of the oldest shoots each year, as well as any broken or diseased branches. Prune in late winter or early spring before growth begins.

Flower buds are produced on the end of a shoot's growth. The flower buds are plump and rounded, leaf buds are small and pointed. Each flower bud may produce a cluster of five to eight berries. If all flower buds are left on, too many berries will be produced and many will be small and worthless. Also, short, thin shoots will grow resulting in poor fruiting wood for the following year's crop. Bushes need little pruning during the first two or three years after planting; only short, weak twiggy growth need be removed.

After two summers in the field, all the plants should be ready to prune for a small crop (1/2 to 1 pint per bush). Remove the thin, twiggy growth and concentrate the potential crop on a small number of stout, fruiting shoots. By limiting the cropping to only the strong shoots, the bush will continue to grow rapidly. A heavy crop at this time dwarfs the bush.

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Planting and Maintaining Blueberry Bushes



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Soil Preparation

Blueberry plants are shallow rooted and require soils that hold moisture well, but are also well-drained. Dry, sandy soils and heavy wet soils can be improved by adding a source of organic matter such as peat moss, well-rotted manure, compost, aged sawdust, or leafmold. Blueberries grow best in soils with a pH range of 4.6 to 4.8 but should do well in soils with a pH ranging from 4.0 to 5.2. An area where plants like laurel, huckleberry, wild blueberry, or pines are growing is usually suitable for highbush blueberries.

Soils should be prepared, and all preparations should be completed two weeks ahead of planting. Rows can be rototilled, or individual holes (two feet across by two feet deep) can be dug as early in the spring as possible. A mixture of equal parts of loam, sand, and organic matter should be placed in the holes before planting.

Fertilizing

Before planting. Since blueberries require acid soils, lime is not needed in a blueberry planting. Often, sulfur, sulfate of ammonia, or another acidic material must be added to lower pH (and increase soil acidity). Well-aged manure can be worked into the soil in the fall before planting.

After planting. About a month after setting out plants, apply one-half to one ounce of 10-10-10 (one to two ounces of 5-10-10 or

equivalent) in a band around the base of the plant.

Following years. Increase rate of fertilizer by one to two ounces (of 10-10-10 or equivalent) per year until mature. When mature, blueberry bushes require about one-half pound of 10-10-10 (or equivalent) per year applied in April. In larger plantings, 40 to 50 pounds of actual nitrogen should be applied per acre.

Planting

Blueberry bushes should be planted in full sunlight for maximum fruit production. Set out plants as early in the spring as possible. Plant bushes one to two inches deeper in the soil than they were in the nursery, six to eight feet apart, in rows spaced eight to ten feet apart. After plants have been set in the holes, fill the holes three-fourths full with soil mixture (see "soil preparation"), and then flood the hole. After the water has drained, fill in the holes with soil and tamp it down.

Mulching

Mulching the plants with clean straw, sawdust, or wood chips will help conserve moisture as well as aid in weed control. A three to four inch layer of the above materials should be suitable. Generally, grass is allowed to grow between the rows of bushes, as long as the grass can be mowed frequently.

Watering

Mature blueberry bushes require one to two

inches of water each week for best growth and productivity, especially during the harvest season.

First Season Care

Blossoms should be removed from newly-set -out plants to encourage maximum growth. Extra water and/or additional fertilizer applications may be necessary if plants are not making much growth.

Pollination

Most fruit trees, including blueberries have both male and female organs on the same flower, but not all are self pollinating. The best bet for blueberries is to have different varieties of blueberries within 100 feet, so bees can travel and cross pollinate. Blueberries cannot be fertilized by their own pollen!

The best way to do this is to have bushes that bloom at different times of the season near each other (early, mid, late). The only two-season combination that will not work is early and late.

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