

Planting Blueberries

Beyond the Garden Gate

by Kathryn Shubar

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Now that the gurus of the plant world are urging gardeners to rely on native plants, perhaps it is time to take a fresh look at blueberries. They are one of the few plants indigenous to North America.

In 1616, Samuel de Champlain recorded that Indians near Lake Champlain gathered wild blueberries for winter storage. Lewis and Clark observed Indians in the Northwest Territory smoke drying blueberries for winter use. This proves that Native Americans knew what they were doing long before nutritionists came on the scene.

Blueberry, cranberry, wintergreen, bearberry, rhododendron, and their relatives are members of the Heath family (*Ericaceae*). There are several related shrubs whose common name is "blueberry." We are interested in only two. The low-bush blueberry is classified as *Vaccinium angustifolium* and grows less than three feet tall. *V. corymbosum* is the high-bush blueberry, growing eight to ten feet, and sometimes taller. The blueberry sold by florists as filler foliage, *V. ovatum*, is native to the Pacific Northwest and commonly called Box Blueberry.

Although the plants will survive in light shade, fruiting will be sparse and fall color will not be nearly as vivid as when grown in full sun. Proper soil pH is critical. A level between 3.5 and 5.5 is required (5.5 is really pushing the plant's tolerance). The site needs to be well-drained and not overly rich. Blueberries prefer poor soil. A thick layer of acid mulch will help to keep-in necessary moisture and protect the shallow roots. If your location is alkaline, forget about growing blueberries or consider growing one of the newer cultivars of low-bush blueberries developed for containers. Sulfur can acidify the soil, but constantly testing and reapplying sulfur is time-consuming and requires a very dedicated gardener. After all, you can make your soil more acid but every rain will percolate more lime up from the limestone subsoil, making for a constant battle.

When selecting specific cultivars, it is always best to consult your local Cooperative Extension office for recommendations. Along with names, they will supply specific growing requirements. Many blueberry cultivars are extremely cold-hardy. Some of the varieties most often recommended for northern growers are Blue Ray, Blue Crop, Earliblue, Jersey, Meador (especially cold-tolerant), and Northland (shorter than the others). It is usually advised that you plant an early, a mid, and a late-season variety, for both a long picking season and to insure complete cross-pollination.


Potted plants are the easiest to establish. Plant 1 to 2 inches deeper than in the pot. Always include all the soil from the pot into the planting hole. The soil is very important because blueberries lack fine root hairs. The soil in which the plants grow in the nursery contains a type of fungus called "endomycorrhizae." This fungus provides the roots with moisture and nutrients while the plant, via the soil surrounding the roots, provides sugars as well as a place to live. The fungus spreads beyond the range of the root system ensuring a good supply of phosphorous to the plant. A thick, organic mulch will provide other nutrients and moisture so that the endomycorrhizae can thrive. Moisture is important for growth and fruit production. Blueberries require regular watering throughout a dry

growing season. If allowed to dry out to the point of wilting, it is most likely that the plant will not recover.

Spring planting is more successful than planting in fall, especially with the irregular snow falls of the last few winters. Since the roots are shallow, winter moisture is a must for fall planting. Newly set plants rarely require pruning. After the first two or three years, any pruning would be to provide a strong, open shape. Most often all you will need to prune are the twiggy tips of branches. Older, non-fruiting wood should be cut to ground level to encourage new basal shoots. However, in our part of the world, this should only be necessary with very old plants.

Blueberries have very few pests or diseases. Their primary nemeses are birds. Some types of netting will need to be installed unless you intend to produce bird food. The easiest method of harvesting ripe berries is by running your hand over a cluster and letting the loosened ripe berries fall into a basket. This method is superior to picking by color because berries need to sit on the bush a little longer after they turn blue to fully ripen.

An additional value of the blueberry is as a purely ornamental bush. Old bushes can be pruned to reveal their interesting lower trunks. Fall color is a striking gold through red to burgundy. Planted in a perennial border or among broad-leaved evergreens, the fall color brings vibrant visual interest at a time when colorful foliage is most appreciated.

The All-American Blueberry is available in a range of heights from ground covers to tall bushes suitable for hedges. Delicious fruit, delicate white to pink flowers in spring, intensely colored foliage in fall... what more could you want from a trouble-free plant? 

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