



# BLUEBERRY

**JUST FRUITS & EXOTICS**

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## INTRODUCTION

Native throughout most of the eastern United States, blueberries are one of the easiest and most rewarding fruits the homeowner can grow. The bushes require a little effort to establish, but once rooted are very disease and drought resistant; most fruit their second year. Thanks to recent breeding programs at the Universities of Florida and Georgia, we now have a wide range of varieties to choose from, making it possible to have delicious blueberries from early May to late July! We attend many blueberry seminars throughout the year so we are always up on the latest and most practical techniques to help you with site evaluation, soil preparation, correct planting procedures and maintenance of your blueberry patch.

## USES IN THE LANDSCAPE

Anywhere you want a hedge, think of blueberries first. These durable, low-maintenance shrubs have a unique misty blue cast and are truly beautiful in all seasons. In spring, dainty, bell-like white blooms cover reddish canes. Flowers are followed by blue-tinged foliage and huge clusters of powder blue fruit. In autumn they make a brilliant show as they turn from orange to scarlet to fiery red.

If you want a short thick hedge, tetraploids grow more slowly and can be sheared. Rabbit-eye varieties make a nice thick hedge anywhere from 6-20 feet high. Use blueberries to line a driveway or walkway or as backdrop hedges. In the garden, line a fence with blueberries for luscious fruit that doesn't take much space and is always lovely. Choose varieties with different ripening times to spread the fruiting season. Blueberries can also be trained into fountain-shaped shrubs or small trees. Some varieties do well as container plants for a patio gardener.

## CONSIDERATIONS IN CHOOSING BLUEBERRY VARIETIES

Blueberries require cross pollination. Thus we always have to plant at least two varieties to ensure good fruit set. Two groups of blueberries are available. **Rabbit-eye** blueberries were developed from native rabbit-eye blueberries. They grow as shrubs and will reach 6-20 feet. Their ripening season is from May to July. **Tetraploid** blueberries are a new development - a cross between Rabbit-eye and

Northern Highbush blueberries. Everything is different about them. They are smaller, slower-growing and have thicker, more crinkly leaves. Most important, they extend the blueberry season by ripening heavy crops at the very start of the blueberry season. Tetraploids require some extra fruit thinning to achieve a balance between plant size and healthy fruit production. Each group requires a pollinator from within the group—you must plant at least two varieties of rabbiteye or two varieties of tetraploid. A brief list of varieties is at the end of this handout.

## **PLANTING AND CULTURE**

### **SITE SELECTION**

Well-drained sandy loam soils are preferred, but blueberries will grow on many soil types if good drainage is provided. Blueberries will grow more vigorously and produce more fruit in full sun. Avoid frost pockets - late season frosts can damage fruit production in early-flowering varieties.

### **SOIL PREPARATION AND PLANTING**

Blueberries require acid soil (pH 4.5-5.5). If you are in doubt about the acidity of your soil, take a soil sample to the Cooperative Extension Agent in your county for a soil test. Blueberries will not grow well in soils with a pH above 5.5. Adjust soil acidity as necessary with powdered sulfur and iron sulfate. **Do NOT use aluminum sulfate**, as this material is toxic to blueberries. For individual plants, sulfur a 6 x 6 foot area around the plant. Hedgerows need to be sulfured in a 3 foot wide band down the row.

In the area you plan to put blueberries, it is advisable to till in some form of acidic organic matter like ground rotted pine bark or oak leaves. When planting dig a planting hole approximately twice as big as the pot and the same depth as the pot. Enrich the planting hole with peat moss mixed with soil dug from the hole (50:50 mix). **Do NOT use mushroom compost or manure** in the planting hole or as mulch. You can make your plants sick and even kill them with manure or mushroom compost.

Remove the blueberry bush from the pot, gently loosen the root ball and place in the planting hole. The bush should be planted **at or slightly above** the same level at which it grew in its pot. Fill the planting hole with the mix of soil and organic matter; gently tamp it in. Water thoroughly to settle the roots and eliminate air pockets. **Do NOT** put fertilizer in the planting hole. Only apply fertilizer if it is the correct time of year (see Fertilization section below).

If desired, construct a water basin around the base of the bush approximately 36 inches in diameter. Blueberries are very shallowly rooted, like azaleas. Mulch in spring and fall with approximately 4-6 inches of acid mulch (pine bark, oak leaves). **Do NOT** mulch with mushroom compost.

Spacing for blueberries depends upon the desired use in the landscape. Bushes can be planted individually or in a hedgerow. If planting a hedgerow, space 4-6 feet apart with rows 10-12 feet apart. If planting bushes individually, place plants for cross pollination no more than 10 feet apart. Remove all flowers the first year to encourage more growth.

### **FERTILIZATION**

We use and recommend the Espoma line of organic fertilizers. Espoma's Holly Tone is best for blueberry plants. When not available look for an organic mix that contains an analyst of roughly 4-3-4. Make sure they contain iron, zinc, manganese, magnesium, molybdenum, copper and boron. These minor elements are very important to plants and most soils are low in these elements. Application rates vary according to type and age of plant, so read the instructions on the bag and fertilize accordingly. We use approximately 1 ½ cups of Holly Tone per application for each

year of a blueberry's age (i.e. 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  cups per application for a one year-old blueberry). Be careful to spread the fertilizer evenly over the blueberry's root zone and water it in well.

Blueberries form suckers and the plant expands each year, the amount of fertilizer applied increases each year until the 4<sup>th</sup> year after planting.

- Year 1: In February, sprinkle 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  cups of Holly Tone in a 24-inch circle around each plant. In May and late July, sprinkle 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  cups of Holly Tone in a 30-inch circle around each plant.
- Year 2: In February, sprinkle 2 cup of Holly Tone in a 36-inch circle around each plant. Repeat in May and late July.
- Year 3 and on: In February, sprinkle 4 cups of Holly Tone around each plant in a 4 ft. circle around each plant. In May and late July, sprinkle 1 cup of Holly Tone in the same 4 ft. circle around each plant.
- HEDGE ROW PLANTINGS by the 3<sup>rd</sup> year the plants should have grown together, apply 4 cups of Holly Tone for every four foot of row, spread fertilizer in a four foot wide band down the row.

In Zones 8-9 fertilize 3 times each year in February, May and late July/early August. For plants further north (Zone 7), fertilize 2 times each year in March and June/July. Never fertilize after August (July in Zone 7) as this will promote new growth when the plant needs to go dormant. If your young blueberry plants aren't growing, they may be stalled. In that event, supplement your fertilizer with a liquid fertilizer for Azalea/Camellias (like Miracid). Treat them once a week for a month. If they still haven't grown 6 inches, continue the treatment. Blueberries need to double in size the first year in the ground or they will be stunted.

## **WATER**

The first year is a critical time for the establishment of a new blueberry bush. Water thoroughly twice a week on light soils and once a week on clay soils. Soak the entire root system deeply. Established bushes should receive at least 1 inch of water each week. Because blueberries are very shallowly rooted, we strongly recommend that irrigation be installed when you plant your blueberries. Microsprinkler irrigation works best, because water is spread over the root zone. Soaker hoses can be used in a pinch. Water regularly, especially during dry periods. Keep an area approximately 4 feet in diameter around the bush clear of grass and weeds to minimize competition for water and nutrients. Mulch this area in spring and fall with 4-6 inches of an acid mulch like pine bark or oak leaves.

## **PRUNING**

Routine pruning of blueberries is unnecessary until plants are 3 years old. During this time, remove dead, damaged or diseased limbs. Cut any leggy growth so the plant will bush up. Make all cuts flush with the limb or the next largest branch. Do not leave stubs.

For established rabbiteye blueberries, approximately one quarter of the oldest canes are pruned each year to encourage cane renewal. Three to four year-old canes have maximum fruit production, declining with age. Blueberries can be lightly topped right after fruit harvest to hold down the height of the plant. All heavy thinning cuts should be made in the dormant season.

## **INSECT AND DISEASE CONTROL**

Blueberries have few disease or insect problems. Occasionally caterpillars can be a problem and may be controlled with products containing Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*).

## **VARIETY LIST – FOR MORE VARIETIES GO TO OUR WEBSITE**

[WWW.JUSTFRUITSANDEXOTICS.COM](http://WWW.JUSTFRUITSANDEXOTICS.COM)

### **Rabbiteye...**

#### **Early Ripening (May)**

**ALAPAHA** A new Georgia release and a breakthrough in early ripening rabbiteye blueberries.

Late blooming to miss that late frost, but ripening in a concentrated burst in May. Vigorous, upright plant with firm and very tasty berries.

**VERNON** It may be a late bloomer, but it ripens early! Just released in 2004 by the University of Georgia, Vernon was bred to replace the old standard Climax. Vernon produces large quantities of big, sweet berries and because it flowers late it escapes those pesky last spring freezes.

#### **Mid Season Varieties (June)**

**BLUEGEM** Another variety that ripens its berries all at one time. This variety has very heavy production and a unique, heavy wax that covers the fruit and new growth. This gives the bush and berries a light powdery blue cast that is distinctly beautiful. Fruit doesn't drop and stores well on the bush. Firm fruit with a distinct blueberry jam flavor.

**BLUEBELLE** Highly recommended for all blueberry lovers! Beautiful, big, supreme-flavored berries that will ripen a few daily for over a month! A blueberry grazers dream!

**BRIGHTWELL** New Georgia release. Plants are super vigorous and upright. A heavy producer of light blue, firm berries with sweet sugary flavor.

#### **Late Ripening Varieties (July)**

**TIFBLUE** Hundreds of acres are planted with Tifblue and many new varieties have some Tifblue in them, as it's one of the most popular standards to breed from. The plants are tall, vigorous and upright. Berries are large, very firm, and highly flavored, and hold well on the bush.

**CENTURION** Centurion ends the blueberry season with a bang! Darker than most blueberries, with a crisp, aromatic and spicy flavor. The plants stand out with shiny, leather-like foliage

### **Tetraploids...**

A new breed of early ripening Blueberry, tetraploids are a cross between rabbiteye and northern highbush Blueberries. Every thing is different about the tetraploids; the plants are smaller, the leaves are different, thicker and more crinkly, and they ripen early and bear more heavily than rabbiteyes.

**O'NEIL** One of the best tasting berries for fresh eating. An excellent pollinator for Bluecrisp. Ripens in early June.

**BLUECRISP** Newly released tetraploid variety. Crispy sweet, delicious berries. Use O'Neil for pollinator. Ripens mid May.