

Blueberries—Nature’s Sweet Snack

By Susan Camp

“When should I plant blueberries and how many years will it take for them to bear fruit?” asked my trainer, Brittney, at the end of a vigorous workout. Brittney is right to ask questions. Too many times, Jim and I have planted a shrub, tree, or perennial without checking to see if the choice was appropriate for our summer heat, erratic winters, and sandy, acidic soil.

Blueberries are woody perennial shrubs native to North America. Wild or “lowbush” blueberries (*Vaccinium augustifolium*) grow in sandy soil on our property. The berries are small and we must compete with the squirrels and birds for a taste, but a handful blueberries is a sweet reward for our trouble.

Most cultivated varieties of blueberry are “highbush” shrubs. Northern highbush (*V. corymbosum*) blueberries are the most commonly cultivated variety in North America. In Virginia, they grow more readily in the mountains and northern counties.

Southern highbush (*V. darrowi*) and rabbiteye (*V. ashei*) cultivars produce well during our hot, humid summers. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-840 “Small Fruit in the Home Garden” recommends southern highbush cultivars ‘O’Neal’ and ‘Suziblue’ and rabbiteye cultivars ‘Brightwell’, ‘Powderblue’, and ‘Premier’ for home gardeners. The chapter “Trees and Small Fruits” in the Gloucester Master Gardeners publication “Home Gardening in Gloucester” suggests several other cultivars suitable for growing in our region. The flavor of all blueberry cultivars benefits from cool nights during the ripening season.

Rabbiteye and southern highbush blueberries thrive in USDA Hardiness Zones 7a to 8a. Southern highbush are hybrids of northern highbush and rabbiteye, with rabbiteye’s adaptability to a variety of soil types, but without northern highbush’s winter tolerance.

Once you decide on a variety and one or more cultivars, prepare your site up to six months in advance for planting in early spring. A sloping location in full sun to part shade with good water drainage and protection from strong winter winds is best. Blueberries require moist, sandy, acidic soils, with a pH of 4.2 to 5.2. Pine needles, pine bark, and elemental sulfur will help lower soil pH. Blueberry bushes have shallow roots, so the added organic material and mulch will help the soil retain moisture.

Purchase two-year-old bare-root or container plants from a reputable garden center. Most cultivars are self-pollinating, but fruit size and flavor will improve if two or more cultivars are planted. Soak bare-root plants in water for several hours and remove dead or broken roots and canes before planting in a hole wide enough to spread the roots. Cover with amended soil and firm lightly.

Blueberry bushes need one to two inches of water each week, and up to four inches per week when the berries are ripening. Fertilize the bushes in the spring of the second year with ammonium sulfate or 10-10-10 fertilizer for acid-loving plants.

During the first two to three years, prune only broken or rubbing canes. When plants have matured, prune back to 10 to 15 canes, removing some of the oldest canes first and leaving two to three from each growing season. Blueberry bushes can be pruned anytime from late fall to early spring.

Birds cause the greatest blueberry crop loss, with squirrels and small rodents running second. Plastic netting, wire cages, or “tobacco” cloth will help prevent access to the fruit. Spotted wing fruit flies lay eggs on ripening fruit. Minimize damage by picking blueberries as soon as they ripen.

Some varieties produce fruit after two years, and most after three years, with full production at five to six years. Plants can live 20 to 30 years.

Pick your blueberries three to seven days after they turn completely blue. Then enjoy them. Almost everyone loves blueberries—in muffins, pies, cobblers, pancakes, and, especially, fresh on cereal or as a naturally sweet snack. You will never want grocery store blueberries again.

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