



Establishing Blueberries in the Home Garden

Gary C. Pavlis, Ph.D., Atlantic County Agricultural Agent & William J. Sciarappa, Ph.D., Monmouth County Agricultural Agent

Blueberries are among the easiest of all the fruit crops to grow in the home garden, as long as soil and drainage requirements are met. They will require little or no spraying for insects or diseases and are highly ornamental throughout the year. The fruit can be used in a variety of ways, such as jams and jellies, baked goods, wine, and of course, eaten fresh. All blueberries prefer full sun exposure and a well-drained soil with adequate moisture.

Site Selection

Blueberries grow well on a wide range of soil types when organic matter is incorporated into the root zone area. Once this is done, only improper pH can limit a blueberry plant's success. The roots of a blueberry plant cannot absorb water or nutrients unless the pH is between 4.0 and 4.8. A soil test should be conducted to determine pH, nutrient levels, and recommendations for pH correction. Usually powdered sulfur must be added to lower the pH to a level within the acceptable range. Once soil pH has been determined for a particular site and sulfur has been added, two to six months are necessary to lower the pH to the desired range. Thus, the latest that sulfur can be added is the fall before spring planting. The amount of sulfur depends on the soil type and pH. Contrary to popular opinion, wet sites are not considered optimal for blueberries. Ideal sites are well drained and high in organic matter.

Planting

Virus-free plants should be obtained from a certified nursery. There are many varieties of blueberries from which to choose (as indicated in FS419, *Selecting Blue-*

berry Varieties for the Home Garden). Nurseries usually ship 2-year-old plants that are 12–24 inches tall. Each plant may have a single cane or several shoots growing from the crown. Organic matter is increased by mixing 1 gallon of peat moss in each planting hole. Commercially, plants are usually spaced 4 feet apart with 10 feet between rows, however, blueberries can be planted 3–4 feet apart in any arrangement fitting the home landscape. Plants are set in the spring ideally before bud break, and a mulch of sawdust, woodchips, leaf compost, or clean straw is placed around each plant to increase organic matter as it slowly decomposes. Mulch also maintains soil moisture and decreases weed competition. Add mulching material each year, so that a depth of several inches is maintained. Plants should be watered at a rate of approximately 1–1½ inches weekly during the growing season. Flower buds are removed both at the time of planting and the following year in order to promote vegetative growth and root establishment.

Pollination

Most highbush blueberry varieties are considered self-pollinating. However, cross-pollination often produces earlier and larger berries. Therefore, at least two varieties should be planted. An early, midseason, and late variety can be planted to extend the harvest season. The harvest lasts at least 2 weeks for each variety, and a combination of early-to-late varieties can result in a harvest from late June through late August.

Fertilization

Plants are not fertilized after planting and no fertilizer is ever placed in the planting hole. Apply ¼ pound of a



10-10-10 fertilizer after a second flush of growth is seen. This new growth indicates the root system has acclimated itself to the site. This rate can be repeated the second year and thereafter, should be increased to ½ pound per plant, half applied in late March and half in late May.

Pruning

Pruning is essential for both the production of high-quality fruit and the maintenance of a healthy plant. During the first 3–4 years, pruning consists of removing weak shoots, canes that are not erect, and dead canes. Retain the longer, heavier fruiting canes. During the first 2 years, fruit buds should also be removed. Fruit buds are found at the terminal 6–10 inches up the canes, and are fatter and rounder than leaf buds, which are found farther down the cane. When plants become 5 or 6 years old, begin to remove some of the canes at ground level. Cut out one of every six canes, choosing the largest, oldest cane, (Figure 1). In this way, the plant will never have canes older than six years no matter the age of the plant. This is important because old canes produce fewer and smaller berries and are subject to more disease problems.

It should be noted that some plants on heavier soils and drier upland sites do not regenerate canes as readily. Pruning these plants consists largely of removing weak and dead wood.

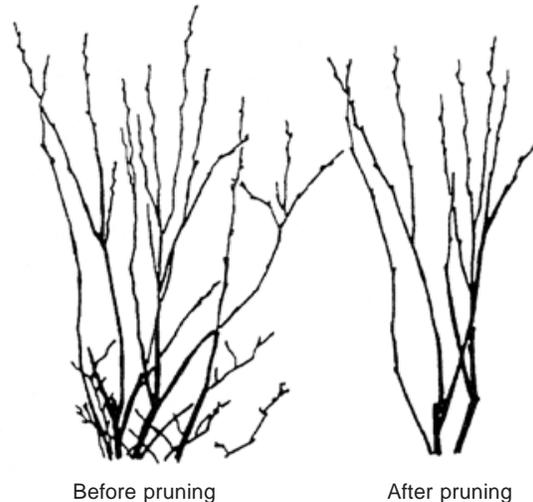
Production

A 3-year-old plant can produce 2–3 pints of berries per season. After the fifth year, production increases to 10 or more pints if the plant is very vigorous.

Pests

Blueberry plants for home gardens are largely disease- and insect-free. If pest problems arise, obtain the fact sheet, FS106, *Blueberry Pest Management for Home Gardens*. The most severe pest problem usually encountered is birds. Birds will eat your entire crop. Inexpensive netting, available at most garden centers, will protect your ripening berries.

Figure 1: Vigorous ‘Bluecrop’ blueberry bush after 5 years in the field.



The steps to pruning are:

1. Remove dead or diseased wood.
2. Remove all short, twiggy growth.
3. Remove all canes that are not erect.
4. Remove one out of every six of the oldest canes at ground level.