



High Bush Blueberries

Growing blueberries in the home garden is an easy, rewarding experience, resulting in many years of flavorful bounty. The shrubs require a minimum of upkeep, needing only to be pruned, mulched, and occasionally fertilized, to maintain health, vigor and production. Also, over its lifetime, a blueberry bush can provide many pounds of delicious fruit, saving money at the grocery store for the devout blueberry eater.

Soil

All blueberries require acidic soil conditions, which makes them perfect for growing in the Willamette Valley since the native soil here is usually quite acidic. Maintaining that acidity is easily done by using acidic fertilizer such as a complete fertilizer that would be used on Rhododendrons. The fertilizer should be applied in early spring over the top of the existing mulch. The mulch, in the form of softwood sawdust or bark mulch, should be applied heavily in the fall around the base of each shrub. Using mulch can increase both the yield and the quality of the berries. The thicker the application of mulch, the more protection it will provide in winter, and the more moisture it will hold in the dry season. One word of caution: if you apply the mulch thickly in and around the stems of the bush, pull some of that away when the growing season starts to prevent rot or infection of the stems.

Planting

High bush blueberries can reach a height of six feet or so, with a four to five foot spread. Therefore, the rows should be at least eight feet apart, keeping the plants themselves six feet apart, unless a hedge is desired.

The top of the root ball should be close to the surface if mulch is used or about four inches deep without mulch. If you are planting containerized bushes, make your planting depth equal to the depth the shrub was in the pot—that is, keep the soil line the same.

Fruit Production

Two different varieties of blueberries should be planted to ensure maximum berry yield. The shrubs will bear fruit if they are the same variety, but they won't produce as much, and they won't be as large as they would with cross-pollination. Any two varieties will cross-pollinate, despite differences in ripening time. The ripening times vary between early—June—and late—August. If you plant an assortment of varieties, you can extend your yield and the harvest time.

It's a good idea to remove blossoms off your newly planted shrub the first year it's in the ground. This promotes further vegetative and root growth, leading to a well-established bush.

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Blueberries have more of a tendency to over-bear than under-bear. Thinning of blossoms each season will promote larger fruit and a healthier bush.

Pruning

After the plant has established itself, the grower may remove old, tired wood that is loaded with too many fruit buds and too few leaf buds. Some of the vegetative wood may be removed to prevent the plant from becoming too sprawling or too high. Also, old wood ultimately becomes unproductive, and can be a weak spot for disease. Pruning this wood out of the bush encourages new sucker growth from the base of the plant, and can help maintain the health and vigor of the bush.

Harvest

Blueberries become sweeter as they hang on the bush. The challenge is keeping birds from enjoying the berries before you have a chance to harvest. Many home gardeners use netting or cheesecloth draped over their bushes to prevent rogue birds from helping themselves. Each full-grown bush (3-4 years old) can bear up to 20 pounds of fruit and is definitely worth protecting!

Varieties

There are many highbush blueberry varieties in existence today, and many of them can be grown with success in the Pacific Northwest. The following is a listing of varieties that we have found to be particularly successful in the Willamette Valley.

- *Berkeley
- *Bluecrop
- *Darrow
- *Duke
- *Elliot
- *Patriot
- *Spartan
- *Toro
- *Reubel
- *Earliblue
- *Chandler
- * Legacy

Ask our staff for descriptions and recommendations of specific varieties.

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