

GROWING BLUEBERRIES

The blueberry (*Vaccinium hybrid*) is a deciduous shrub in the Erica family and native to the eastern United States. It is related to the Rhododendrons, Ericas, Manzanitas, and Azaleas. They are handsome hedge or shrub plants, usually growing to about 6'. In the autumn, the leaves turn brilliant scarlet, orange and yellow. The flowers resemble those of the manzanita, dainty white or pink urn shaped blossoms with a light fragrance in the spring.

Like its cousins, it needs acid, well- drained soils. Blueberries thrive in full to part sun but their roots like to stay moist and cool. A mulch, such as redwood compost or Microbark will help keep shallow roots moist and control weeds. If your soil is not acidic enough (Blueberries do best with a pH of 4.5-5.5), amend your soil with ground bark or EB Stone Azalea Camellia Mix. You can also apply Aluminum Sulphate to acidify the soil. Blueberries will grow in barrels or containers too! You will want to use acid fertilizers whether liquid or dry through the growing season. If yellowing leaves are a problem, use iron sulfate or iron chelate. Provide frequent water. Space plants 3' apart for an informal hedge, 4' to 6' apart as shrubs. You can accommodate 2 plants per barrel or large container.

Plants generally shape themselves but some pruning may be needed to prevent overbearing. Overbearing results in smaller fruits and slowed growth. On first year plants, you should strip all the flowers to allow the bush to put all its energy into growth. On older plants, either remove some of the oldest branches each year or cut back the ends of twigs to the point where the fruit buds are more widely spaced. Plant two varieties for better pollination. Planting at least 2 plants for each season- early (early to mid June), midseason (early to mid July), and late (late July into August)- will provide berries through much of the summer. A good rule of thumb for adequate fruit production is to allow two plants for each member of the family. Most of the blueberries that do well in our area are **highbush** varieties. They require definite winter cold. There are also some relatively new berries that are known as **southern highbush**. These varieties are better adapted to areas where the winters are mild. They ripen their fruits from mid to late spring (late April to June). They also tend to be semievergreen. Here are brief descriptions of some of the most popular varieties for our area:

'Berkeley' is one of the most popular selections for the home garden. Berries are medium to large and powder blue with less acid than most. It bears mid season. The bush has good ornamental value, growing 5' to 6' tall with good autumn color and yellow twigs in winter.

'Bluecrop' is a mid season cultivar and a tall grower. It is considered one of the best all around for consistent yields. Fruit is large and of excellent flavor. This plant makes an attractive shrub, upright 4' to 6'. Leaves turn red in fall.

'Blueray' produces large, bright blue fruit with outstanding dessert flavor in early to midseason. The shrub has excellent ornamental value with lovely pink spring flowers, dark green summer foliage and burgundy red autumn leaves. It grows 4' to 6' tall. It performs well in areas with hot summers and very cold winters.

‘Cape Fear’ is a southern highbush variety. The fruit is very large and light blue with a mild, sweet flavor. The shrub has a weeping habit and grows 4’ to 5’ tall.

‘Georgia Gem’ is also a southern highbush. Medium sized, firm fruits are produced very early. The shrub is an upright grower 4’ to 5’ tall.

‘Misty’ bears bumper crops of very large berries of excellent flavor. This southern highbush ripens very early and the shrubs are short 3’ to 4’, good for containers.

‘O’Neal’ is also a very early southern highbush. The plant grows upright 4’ to 6’ and the fruit is very large and flavorful.

‘Sharpblue’ is a self fertile variety bearing in early or mid season. Fruit is medium large and medium blue with good flavor. The bush grows 4’ to 6’ Foliage turns red in fall.

‘Sunshine Blue’ this is a mid season southern highbush variety. It is a very compact grower well suited to container growing, growing 3’ tall. A heavy crop of good sized tangy berries is produced. Very low chill.