

Highbush Blueberries

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Highbush blueberries are a popular home garden fruit for both fresh and frozen use. They grow well throughout the southern half of New Hampshire and grow satisfactorily on warmer, protected sites in northern New Hampshire (any sites where winter temperatures rarely fall below -25°F and that provide protection from prevailing winter winds).

Site and Soil

Blueberries grow best in a well-drained sandy loam, rich in organic matter. Clay soils can be made suitable for blueberries by the addition of organic matter (such as peat moss) and sand. In very poorly drained soils, blueberries may be planted in ridges 4 inches above the surrounding soil level. Full sunlight all day long is essential for maximum production.

Blueberries require an acid soil with a pH range of 4.5 to 5.0. Abandoned pastures and fields and woodland soils generally have a pH suitable for blueberry growth, although a soil test (available through county Cooperative Extension offices) should be used to insure a proper pH level. If the soil pH is above 5.0, an application of fine ground sulfur or aluminum sulfate will be recommended. Do not apply sulfur or aluminum sulfate except as directed by a soil test recommendation.

Planting Blueberries

Early spring planting of healthy 2- or 3-year old plants is recommended. Dig a planting hole at least twice as large as the blueberry plant root system. Fortify the backfill soil with 1/4 of its volume with wet peat moss. Set the plant slightly deeper than it was set in the nursery and water thoroughly. Take care that the blueberry roots do not dry out during the transplanting process. Prune out weak and broken branches.

Highbush blueberries are normally planted 5 feet apart in rows 8 to 10 feet apart.

Care of the Planting

- 1) *Remove Blossoms* -- Remove all blossoms that appear the year the plants are set (second year blossom removal also is desirable) to encourage plant growth.
- 2) *Fertilizer* -- Three to four weeks after planting, apply 2 ounces 7-7-7 fertilizer (a fertilizer designed for acid-loving plants such as rhododendrons and azaleas) or its equivalent. Apply fertilizer in a circle 15 to 18 inches from the plant. In future years, increase this fertilizer according to Table 1.

TABLE 1

Amount of Fertilizer/Plant

<i>Years from Planting</i>	<i>7-7-7 or</i>	<i>Ammonium Sulfate</i>
	ounces	ounces
Newly-set	2	1
1	2	1
2	4	1 1/2
3	6	2
4	8	3
5	10	4
6 and older	12	4

- 3) *Mulch* -- Blueberries have a shallow root system and must be mulched with a 3 to 4 inch deep layer of organic mulch. Sawdust, bark, pine needles, leaves, or combinations of these can all be used. Moisten soil before mulch application.
- 4) *Weed Control* - Complete weed control around blueberry plants is essential.
- 5) *Irrigate* -- Supply plants with a uniform and adequate water supply as needed from blossom time through harvest.

Pruning Blueberries

During the first 2 or 3 years, blueberries require little pruning except to remove dead, diseased, or weak branches. After the third year, prune plants annually in early spring. Fruit is produced on vigorous, one-year-old wood resulting from an annual moderate pruning. First remove all dead, broken, or diseased wood and branches close to the ground. Remove at ground level any old, weak stems no longer producing strong one-year-old wood. Keep 6 to 7 vigorous older stems and 1 or 2 strong new shoots per bush. The new shoots will eventually replace older stems.

Harvesting

Harvesting begins in early to mid-July in New Hampshire and peak production is generally reached during early August. Fruit is produced in clusters of 5 to 10 berries which ripen in succession over a period of several weeks. Pick only those berries which are fully ripe and harvest all of the ripe fruit on the bush at the time of harvest. Blueberries often turn blue with a slight reddish tinge several days before they are fully ripe. Delaying

harvest until berries are fully ripe will result in better tasting, larger fruit and increased total yields.

Insect and Disease Control

Blueberries generally have few insect and disease pest problems. The use of a general purpose fruit spray mixture according to label directions will usually control most common blueberry insect and disease problems if they do develop. Sevin may be useful in controlling pests like the blueberry maggot. For control recommendations for specific insect and disease pest problems, contact your county Cooperative Extension office.

Bird Control

Birds pose a particularly serious problem for home blueberry growers. The use of netting (plastic mesh available from garden supply dealers) is the most effective method of control. Usually a permanent post and wire frame is built to hold the netting in place up off the plants. Netting should be applied as soon as the first fruits turn blue and removed and put in storage as soon as the harvest is complete.

Varieties

Highbush Types - These cultivars should be generally hardy throughout the southern half of N.H.

- Patriot** - Large fruit. High productivity. Very hardy, excellent flavor.
- Blueray** - Large fruit. High productivity. Excellent fruit size and flavor.
- Bluecrop** - Large, powder blue, firm berries. Moderate productivity. Will not tolerate wet soils.
- Jersey** - Medium to large fruit. Good quality, late summer berry

Highbush/Lowbush Types - These cultivars should be hardy throughout the state including Coos County. They will perform best when snow cover is good. In addition to fruit production, these cultivars are well adapted for ornamental use.

- Northland** - Medium sized fruit. Very hardy. High productivity. 5 ft. tall.
- North Country** - Medium sized fruit. Moderate productivity. Very hardy (to -35°F). Sweet. 2 ft. tall.
- Northblue** - Large fruit. Moderate productivity. Very hardy (to -35°F). 2-1/2 ft. Good quality.
- St. Cloud** - Large, fruit; protective. Very hardy. 4 ft. tall.
- Friendship** - Med - Small fruit; productive. Very hardy. 2 ft. tall.