

NEWS RELEASE

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Blueberries

Recently, the Cooperative Extension Office received a call from a gardener wanting to know how to grow blueberries, which are now available bare root at local nurseries and garden centers. Popular varieties for our area include South Moon, Jubilee, Misty and Ozark Blue.

Blueberries belong to the family Ericaceae, which include azaleas and rhododendrons. Most gardeners will recognize this plant family as one that does best in acidic soil (4.5-5.5). Stanislaus County soils range in pH from 5 to 7.5, so most garden soils will need to be amended. To determine the pH level of your home garden soil, use a simple pH soil test kit.

Apartment gardeners or gardeners with limited space can grow blueberries in containers. Use an acidic planting mix specifically for azalea type plants and use a soil pH test kit to determine when to add amendments.

Before planting blueberries in your garden, amend the soil with elemental sulfur at a rate of approximately 1 to 2 pounds per 100 square feet to lower the pH one unit. Aluminum sulfate can also be used, at the rate of 6-12 pounds per 100 square unit.

To keep the soil at the optimum pH, side dress with a 10-10-10 fertilizer four weeks after planting, preferably one composed of potassium sulfate and ammonium sulfate. Use about 1 oz. (1 ½ tbsp) per plant, sprinkling it within 12-18 inches of the plant, but not directly on the crown or stems. Keep your soil test kit handy to determine when to apply more fertilizer. Once the plants reach maturity, fertilizer can be used at a rate of ½ cup per plant 3-4 times per year. Start fertilizing in spring and continue at 2 month intervals. Organic fertilizers such as feather, blood or fish meal can also be used at the rate of one pound per plant.

Plant blueberries in a sunny location and in raised beds that are 8-18 inches high and 3-4 feet wide. Space plants 8-10 feet apart, and cover the roots with 1-2 inches of soil. Lightly firm the soil around the plants and water thoroughly.

Blueberries have shallow, fibrous roots and need adequate drainage and aeration. They are very susceptible to drought injury, and for optimum health should receive 1-2 inches of water per week from May through September. During July and August, water two times per week to prevent them from drying out. The balance between adequate moisture and too much water is important, as blueberries are susceptible to root rot. The best method of watering is to use minisprinkler irrigation. A drip system can also be used, with a line running on each side of the blueberry plants.

It will take at least three years for a blueberry plant to become established and healthy. Remove all blossoms as they appear. Prune off any diseased and damaged wood during the first three dormant seasons. After their third year, blueberries should be pruned annually.

Blueberry plants have a naturally bushy form, but the number of canes should be limited to the age of the plant, up to a maximum of 6 to 8 canes for old bushes. Yearly remove 1-2 canes so that no canes are over 4-6 years old. Prune out suckers and weak wood, especially from the top of the plant.