

Planting Blueberries

Q. I am seriously considering planting blueberries. Does your office have any information concerning this crop?

A. The UC Cooperative Extension office in Santa Cruz County has a lot of information for growers and gardeners interested in growing blueberries. For an overview of cultivation and cost of production, go to:

http://coststudies.ucdavis.edu/files/blueberry_sc2007.pdf

and for organic blueberry culture:

http://coststudies.ucdavis.edu/files/blueberry_org_sc2007.pdf

A few more items merit emphasis when considering cultivating blueberries in Santa Cruz County.

Soil Preparation: Many potential blueberry growers ask when the best time to plant is, and the answer is always when the soil is completely ready. Due to a high iron requirement, blueberries thrive in very acidic soils, generally under pH of 5.5 is best, and this takes substantial work with inputs of sulfur and subsequent application of acidifiers like acetic or sulfuric acid to the irrigation water to keep the pH down. Mulching plant beds with pine bark or chips is also highly recommended.

Varieties: All varieties bear in the spring, starting around the end of April or beginning of May. The variety trial at UCSC Agroecology Farm so far indicates that the Northern highbush varieties generally are less suited for our area, quite probably stemming for their high requirement of winter cold conditioning. Southern highbush varieties appear to perform better here, quite probably owing to a lower winter cold conditioning requirement. So far, the varieties Southmoon, Sharpblue and Jewel are recommended based on ease of harvest, flavor and fruit size. The variety Sapphire has one advantage of having an additional crop in the fall along with the standard crop in the spring, but unfortunately fruit is fairly small and is not stand out for flavor.

Pest Management: Among the pests are recorded for blueberry, the number one pest problem in blueberries by a wide margin are birds. Birds cannot resist blueberries, and seek them out above all other small fruits. As such, growers must cover their bearing blueberry bushes with bird netting and continue to maintain this netting to prevent birds from getting to the crop.

This has been a brief guide to growing blueberries in the Monterey Bay area of Santa Cruz County.

Please contact Mark Bolda at UCCE Santa Cruz if you have more questions on this topic or any other topics concerning blackberry, raspberry or strawberry production.