



BLUEBERRIES IN THE HOME GARDEN

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Blueberries, native to the US, are not only an excellent food source but also the clusters of white flowers in the spring make them a pleasing ornamental as well.

Before considering blueberries for the garden, check the pH of the soil. Blueberries are very fussy about acidity, in fact, the specific pH range desired is 4.5-5.5. Soil pH above 5.5 may cause yellowing to appear between the veins and, if left for too long in this soil, the plants may die. Fortunately, many of our foothill soils are already acidic!

If you are successful growing azaleas, rhododendrons or camellias, you shouldn't have trouble with blueberries. For best results, first test the pH of your soil and, if soil testing indicates that you must make major adjustments to lower the pH, you should begin amending the soil with soil sulfur or a similar product at least 6 months before planting (adhere to application rates on bag) .

Be sure to include lots of organic matter, provide excellent drainage, and select a site which receives full sun. Blueberries can also be grown in containers successfully if your soil conditions aren't suited for them.

Now that your soil or container is ready, selection of blueberry plants appropriate for your area is the next step. There are many varieties available, here are a few suggestions.

Northern Highbush

(Sunset zone 2-9, 14-17) A definite winter chill (1000 hours) is needed for these to thrive. These varieties also do not tolerate high summer temperatures as well as the Southern Highbush.

- 'Bluecrop' Midseason. Erect, tall growth. Large berries. Excellent flavor. Attractive as an ornamental.
- 'Chandler' Mid to late season. Tall, upright. Very large, sweet berries, produce over a long season.
- 'Elliot' Late. Tall, upright. Medium to large fruit with excellent flavor.
- 'Earliblue' Early. Tall, erect. Large fruit of excellent flavor.
- 'Ivanhoe' Early to midseason. Large, dark berries are firm, tart and crisp.

Southern Highbush

(Sunset zone 8, 9, 14-17, 18-24) Keep in mind the Southern Highbush plants are better suited for mild-winter climates and do not do well in some Placer County areas. It pays to do your homework before making your purchases. Here are a few varieties:

- 'O'Neal' Early. Medium sized plant and berries. Great flavor.
- 'Jubilee' Midseason. Does well in clay soils and hot weather.

Check with local gardeners to find out what blueberries are producing in your area.

Planting Blueberries

Plants are available bare root and in containers. The ideal time to plant is generally in the spring. Position the plants so the crown is no greater than 1/2 inch below the ground. There is no need to fertilize the plants at this time as blueberries do not require large amounts of fertilizer and are sensitive to being over-fertilized. Once you have planted your blueberries, mulch them with a 3-4 inch layer of pine bark or pine needles. The pine based mulch helps maintain the acid soil condition.

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It is suggested that, in order for the plants to become well established, you should remove flowers which bloom during the first year. Also, blueberries have a fine shallow root system and do not take kindly to cultivation.

Cultural Care

The water you use may also influence the acidity of the soil. Check the pH, if it is around 7 (which is common for domestic water) consider mixing a 10% vinegar 90% water solution specifically for the blueberries.

Keep the plants moist but do not over water, as constantly wet soil will kill the plants.

Over fertilizing can also cause problems. Your best choice is a "sparse" application of a fertilizer specifically labeled for use on azaleas and rhododendrons.

Berries grow on canes that have overwintered. Prune in the winter or early spring removing dead or damaged branches. Pruning will prevent overbearing which leads to small fruit and slows the plant growth. As the plant matures remove older branches and weak shoots, this will result in a healthier and eye pleasing shrub.

When fruiting, be on the look out for birds! 1/4" bird netting will protect your fruit from most birds.

By following these several guidelines you too can successfully grow blueberries in your home garden.

References

Sunset Western Garden Book. 2007.

California Master Gardener Handbook. 2002. Dennis R. Pittenger, ed. UCANR Pub 3382.

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