

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Now that the fresh berry season is over and all that luscious, locally grown fruit is only a memory, it might be a good time to consider planting some of your favorites in your garden. Blueberries are a good choice for home gardens because the bushes not only produce wonderful fruit but they are also very ornamental. Their beautiful fall color adds late garden interest. Plant a single highbush blueberry, Vaccinium corymbozum, or a row of these beauties. They create a very desirable hedge.

Highbush blueberries grow to a height of 4 to 6 feet. Although they are self-pollinating, planting two or more varieties seems to boost fruit production. Some cultivars that are recommended for this area are early bearing varieties like 'Earliblue,' 'Patriot' and 'Olympia.' Among the mid-season varieties 'Bluecrop' and 'Berkley' are listed as desirable. 'Jersey' ripens in late August and continues producing until a frost. 'Darrow' is a late bearing cultivar with very large fruit.

Blueberry bushes are planted while they are dormant, from January to March. Small two-year stock should not be allowed to fruit for 2 years, to insure well-developed plants. Give the small plants plenty of room to expand and dig the planting hole wide enough to spread out the roots. Be sure to give your new bushes plenty of organic material around their roots. One of the most important things to remember when growing blueberries is they like an acid soil with a pH of 4 to 5. If the soil pH is higher than 6, add garden sulphur or dusting sulphur to increase the acidity. Mulch your new plants with sawdust or peat moss, which helps to lower the pH, suppress weeds and keep the shallow roots cool and moist. Do not fertilize young plants. Chemicals can burn new tender roots. On older established bushes, you may use a 5-10-10 fertilizer in the early spring, after bud break.

Other considerations to note when planting blueberries are:

- \* Light - Plant your bushes in full sun or as close to it as possible for maximum fruit production.
- \* Water - Blueberries shallow roots dry out quickly. They need supplemental water during drought periods from June to September.
- \* Weed - Blueberries do not take kindly to competition for water and nutrients. Keep the root zone weed free but take care not to damage the shallow root systems while cultivating.
- \* Pruning - Young plants do not need pruning. As plants mature, prune off low branches near the ground and trim out dead branches to next strong lateral.

Blueberries are reasonably pest free. Aphids may infest plants, which will require that you hose them off. Root weevils, both larva and adults can be a problem. Look for the telltale notching of the leaves to identify this critter. The larvae feed on roots. There are few, if any, sprays that the home gardener can use against this insect. Some success has been achieved by applying parasitic nematodes in the fall, when the larvae are present. The nematodes feed on the weevil larva. Mummy berry is the most serious disease of highbush blueberries. Use a fungicide in the spring for control.

For more detailed information about growing blueberries and other small fruits in the home garden, visit the WSU Extension office and ask for the Extension Bulletin #1640 or go on-line at <http://pubs.wsu.edu/> to download EB1640.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.