

# Cultivating Blueberries In a Home Garden

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## The power of the blue

We are fortunate to live in an area famous for its berry crops that we easily access at farmers' markets, grocery stores and roadside stands. But growing berries in your yard can be very satisfying too. Take blueberries, for example. With careful cultivar selection, you can enjoy at least two months of fruit in season. The berries are just steps away when you want them for snacks, cereal or smoothies. Plus, they're remarkably easy to preserve. And after harvest, you can delight in their blazing fall leaf color.

Blueberries are a productive and ornamental perennial shrub. There are four main types of blueberries commonly grown in our area. The northern highbush type, and its many cultivars, can reach 5-9' high and 5' wide. This type is preferred by gardeners in the temperate zones where winter temperatures don't drop below minus 20-degrees F.

The second most popular type is the southern highbush designed for milder regions of the country where winter temperatures don't drop below 0-degrees F. The third type, the rabbiteye, is less winter hardy than the first two. The fourth type is the half-high blueberry, bred for cold regions where winter temperatures reach minus 35-45 degrees F. This article will focus on the northern highbush type cultivars.

Here are some tips for beginning—or expanding—your blueberry production.

**Cultivar selection.** Because these bushes will be with you for a long time, carefully research cultivar qualities before making purchases. Blueberry cultivars vary considerably in their flavor, productivity and robustness.

One source of cultivar information is university extension publications. Two such manuals are available free for downloading on your computer. *Growing Small Fruits in the Home Garden* by Brun, DeVetter and Benedict (WSU Extension, April 2016) examines cultivars that are especially suited to Western Washington. *Blueberry Cultivars for the Pacific Northwest* by Strik, Finn, and Moore (OSU, U of Idaho and WSU, February 2014) describes cultivars for our three states. Tables in both provide information such as harvest period, fruit and plant characteristics, fruit flavor and disease resistance.

Other sources of information can be your local plant nurseries and university extension horticultural research centers. The former can advise you about which cultivars are popular with gardeners and why. The owners may also allow you to sample fruit from a variety of bushes so

that you can run your own taste test. If you are lucky enough to have a university extension center, check the Website for berry production and learn what projects and tests they're conducting in that field. They may offer workshops on blueberry cultivation, and their instructors are usually eager to answer gardeners' questions.

Although highbush blueberries are self-fruitful, you will get larger berries and longer production if you plant at least two cultivars within the northern highbush type. You may also want to plant cultivars with harvest times that span the growing season. That way, you can be berry-rich for over two months.



Some blueberries produce large clusters of berries. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

**Site Selection and preparation.** Blueberries require full sun for good production. They are also very particular about soil conditions, preferring well-drained, light soils that are high in organic matter and have an acid pH between 4.5 and 5.5. (Test your soil a year prior to planting and lower your pH—if necessary—by applying sulfur.)

If your soil doesn't drain well, consider creating raised beds that you can monitor and adjust for soil quality. A raised bed of 12-15 inches will usually provide adequate drainage. Though the soil must drain well, blueberries need ample water, especially during fruit set and development. Therefore, your site should have access to irrigation, allowing the plants to receive one inch of water per week May through August. Apply two inches of an acidic mulch around the plants

(e.g., sawdust or arborists' chips) that will help prevent annual weed invasions, contribute organic matter and conserve moisture.

**Planting and maintenance.** The ideal time to plant your two- to three-year old bushes is January through March—dormant season here. Remove flower buds, flowers and any fruit that develops the first year on two-year old bushes so that the plant can devote full energy to growth and root establishment. (You can harvest the fruit on three-year old plants.) Dig a hole large enough to spread out the roots, place the plant in the hole and fill with the soil, pressing firmly to guarantee good root/soil contact. Water the plant to continue to settle soil around the roots.

Apply fertilizer late April to May. Blueberries use the ammonium form of nitrogen and prefer ammonium sulfate or urea fertilizers as their nitrogen source. Pruning is generally reserved for plants older than two years. Charles Brun *Growing Small Fruits in the Home Garden* recommends the following guide for pruning during the dormant season.

Remove:

- low growth that does not stand erect.
- diseased canes or ones that rub or cross one another.
- twiggy growth with few buds at the tops of bushes.
- older canes with few side shoots (cut at the ground).

More important, be sure to cover your plants with bird netting, the best protection against bird pests. One strategy is to build a PVC frame above the plant rows and then cover it with the netting, making sure that the netting is secured at the ground.

**Disease.** Blueberries are vulnerable to several diseases that may require your intervention. The fungal disease, mummy berry, and the insect pest, spotted wing Drosophila, can be challenging. For details about blueberry pests and diseases and measures to counter them, refer to Charles Brun et al for a thorough discussion. Also, consult Hortsense, WSU Extension's online diagnostic plant disease tool: <http://hortsense.cahnrs.wsu.edu/Home/HortsenseHome.aspx>

Despite threats from a few diseases, blueberries are a wonderful choice for Western Washington home gardeners with a sunny area in which to grow these attractive, productive bushes.

## **RESOURCES:**

- Charles A. Brun, Ph.D., DeVetter, L., Ph.D., and Benedict, C. April, 2016. *Growing Small Fruits in the Home Garden*. Washington State University.
- Charles A. Brun, Ph.D. and Michael R. Bush, Ph.D. 2013. *Organic Pest and Disease Management in Home Fruit Trees and Berry Bushes*. Washington State University.
- Bernadine C. Strik, Ph.D, Finn, C., Ph.D. and Moore, P.P., Ph.D. 2014. *Blueberry Cultivars for the Pacific Northwest*. Pacific Northwest Extension Publications.
- Bernadine C. Strik, Ph.D. March, 2008. *Growing Blueberries in Your Home Garden*. Oregon State University Extension.