

Blueberries

Blueberries belong to the same plant family, Ericaceae, as rhododendrons and azaleas. They are wonderfully suited to gardens on the western side of the Cascades in the Pacific Northwest.

They can be a landscape plant in your garden, starting out in the spring with abundant clusters of white flowers followed by delicious, good for you blueberries from early July to September. In the fall, many of the plants reward you with a blaze of color. There are varieties that remain green all year.

You can grow tall stately blueberries that are 5 to 6 feet tall, compact evergreen bushes that grow to 3 feet, dwarf bushes at 18 inches and groundcovers with a 1-foot height and a spread of 3 feet. Typically, you will get 3 to 5 pounds of fruit on lowbush and dwarf blueberries and between 15-20 pounds on a mature highbush.

Blueberries typically do not begin to bear fruit until they are between 4 and 5 years old. Plant more than one variety of blueberry for good pollination. They can remain in your garden indefinitely once they are established. The roots are fine and shallow, preferring a well-drained soil with lots of organic matter. The plant does best in full sun, but will tolerate a site with partial shade. If you grow in partial shade, your yield will not be as great.

Keep your blueberries moist and mulched through the hot summer months. Be sure that the entire root zone has moisture, not just near the crown of the plant. Lack of water can be noted by reddened foliage, weak thin shoots and reduced fruiting. Your plants will thank you for fertilizing them by producing more blueberries.

Age of plants from transplants	5-10-10 (oz.) March 15 - April 15	Ammonium sulfate (oz.) May 20	Ammonium sulfate (oz.) June 15
Newly set	0	0	0
1 year	2 (1/4 cup)	1 (2 Tbsp.)	1 (2 Tbsp.)
2 years	4 (1/2 cup)	1-2 (2-4 Tbsp.)	1-2 (2-4 Tbsp.)
3 years	6 (3/4 cup)	1-2 (2-4 Tbsp.)	1-2 (2-4 Tbsp.)
4 years	8 (1 cup)	2-3 (1/4 cup + 1 Tbsp.)	1-2 (2-4 Tbsp.)
5 years	10 (1 1/4 cup)	2-3 (1/4 cup + 2 Tbsp.)	1-2 (2-4 Tbsp.)
6 years	12 (1 1/2 cup)	2-3 (1/4 cup + 2 Tbsp.)	1-2 (2-4 Tbsp.)

Blueberry fertilization: quantity of fertilizers per plant in ounces and approximate equivalents

To maintain the vitality of your plant, pruning should begin when the plant has been in your garden 4 to 5 years. If you have twiggy tips on your branches, thin them out. Remove broken and diseased branches. Prune interior crossing branches to admit light to the center of the plant and so you can easily see and reach the berries. When a branch reaches more than 1 inch in diameter at the ground level, remove that branch. You want a balance of

new, juvenile and old growth in your plant. Fall is the best time for pruning as it will delay spring bloom thus reducing the possibility of early frost damage. The more vigorous the wood, the larger the berry. Heavily pruned bushes compensate by producing larger berries. Fruiting occurs on one year old branches.

Blueberries have relatively few problems. In the Pacific Northwest, mummyberry, a fungal disease of highbush blueberries, can cause some concern. If the spring is very wet, the disease can strike. Mummified fruit left on the ground from the last season hosts brown, mushroom-like cups that release fungal spores. The spores then infect the new flower clusters leaving them blackened and withered. These in turn infect the opening flowers and the fruit when borne is likewise infected. Until they begin to ripen, the berries look normal. As time goes on, instead of becoming a lush blue, the berries turn a reddish- tan, drop to the ground and the cycle resumes. Mummyberry can be controlled by raking the soil beneath the plants to remove all old fruit. Mulch beneath the plant in early March. If you have infected berries, remove them before harvest.

Make blueberries a part of your edible landscape. They're easy to grow, come in varied sizes, are good for you, and are wonderful eaten straight off the bush. An abundant harvest can be picked and frozen for a taste of summer in the middle of winter.

References

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