

## GROWING BERRIES Part I

Claudia Steen  
Master Gardener

This is a two-part series where we cover Strawberries and Blueberries in this article and Raspberries and Blackberries in Part II.

There is nothing more rewarding than to go out to your garden and pick berries that can be consumed fresh. All berries are Herbaceous Perennials therefore it is important to choose a good location as that is where they will most likely remain.

### **S** TRAWBERRIES

Buy dormant strawberry stock that consists of a crown and root which will send up shoots, leaves and eventually runners, most varieties last 3-4 years and then need to be replaced.

Planting: Do not plant where potatoes, tomatoes, eggplants, or peppers were previously planted due to Verticillium wilt transfer. The location chosen needs 6 hours of direct sun and plant in well drained, loamy, sandy soil. It is best to prepare the bed in the fall with composted steer manure and organic matter. Have the pH tested and is best at pH 6.5 so you may need to incorporate sulfur or ammonium sulfate in the soil to arrive at that pH. Plant March or April if bare root and May if potted plants. Loosen the soil, plant 6" deep spreading the roots in a fan shape and leave the crown at soil level, 8" apart. It is best to mulch to help retain moisture and to keep soil acid.

Even watering is important, especially before and during harvest. Fertilize with 5-10-5 especially before fruit set and during harvest.

Always pinch back runners to send energy to the plant and berry production.

Bird control is important as the berries ripen so it is best to put hoops and netting over the plants or use floating row cover. Shade cloth can be applied July and August to protect Ever bearing plant who produce in the late summer.

Harvest early morning, leave on the calyxes, refrigerate, and wash only before consuming. After harvest remove the leaves but don't damage crown. Cover with mulch (straw) over the winter for protection.



**There are 3 Types of strawberry plants:**

June bearing is the most productive with 1 heavy crop. They form flowers in the fall and produce fruit in June. They produce runners so matted rows are encouraged so plant runners fill in the spaces. When finished producing cut or mow all leaves to stimulate vigorous new growth but don't damage the crown.

Example: Rainer / Chandler / Shukan

Ever bearing bear fruit twice, once in spring and once in late summer but in small numbers.

Example: Quinault / Ozark beauty

Day neutral set fruit spring and fall produce few runners so the hill system best. They are sensitive to heat so fruit production will go down in July & August.

Example: Tristar / Tribute



*Strawberry bed starting to blossom*

# **B** LUEBERRIES

Blueberries have their growing challenges but many rewards (80 calories/cup packed with antioxidants). When established they are long lived and provide fresh berries each year.

It is important to precondition the soil, especially in Eastern WA that has alkaline soils (6.5-7.5). Blueberries demand acid soil (4.0-5.5) if you do not provide that it triggers iron deficiency which results in yellow foliage and then kills the plants.

The year before, start treating the soil by mixing sulfur powder into the top 8" of the soil. Test the pH and you will need to repeat the process. Improve the soil by adding organic matter, rotted manure, sawdust, or peat moss (an acidifier).

Plant in full sun but afternoon shade is desirable in eastern WA with hot summers.

Plant at least 2 different varieties that results in better pollination and bigger, earlier fruit. Two or more different ripening times also extends the season for your enjoyment.

Buy container plants that are 3-4 years old is best or you can get 2-year bare root stock. The first year remove all blossoms to encourage strong roots and stems.



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Dig a hole to 14-18" deep but back fill with organic matter. Blueberries have shallow roots so spread-out roots on top of the soil, then fill the hole and leave a slight depression for water to sink to roots. Avoid fertilizing the first year so roots are not burnt. Spacing depending on variety but the averages 4-5 feet.

Water should be constant, with even watering of shallow roots. It is best to not let them dry out, so mulching is required. A drip system on a timer is best. Drought symptoms include reddened foliage, weak, thin shoots, and reduced fruit set.

Use a balanced 5-10-10 fertilizer in the early spring or before fruit set. Follow up in May annually with ammonium sulfate at leaf bud break to keep the soil acidic.

Netting over the plants before and during production is best to protect berries from being eaten by robins, starlings, and finches.

After 4-5 years you need to prune in early spring to vase shape, opening the center for air circulation. Remove low spreading branches near the ground. Remove broken, diseased branches and any canes over 1" in diameter at ground level. Cut branch tips if twiggy with hand shears. Flower buds are nearer the tip and are fatter and less pointed than leaf buds.

Pick when ripe, not all ripen at the same time, so you need to pick every 3-5 days throughout season. Harvest is best in the early morning, they have a 2-week shelf life in the refrigerator, and also freeze well.

**There are 5 main types of Blueberry bushes:**

High bush: Northern - East coast 5-9' tall but also common in Pacific NW.

Ex: Duke, Bluegold, Bluecrop, Blueray, Chandler, Legacy.

High bush: Southern - Florida, CA 6-8 ' tall - need dormant period 32-45 degree.

Is not recommended for home growers

Low bush: NE US Minnesota to Virginia, 2' tall.

Ex: Blomidon, Burgundy, Brunswick

Rabbit Eye: SE US 6-10' tall, like long hot summers, sensitive to winter cold.

Ex: Pink Lemonade, Tifblue, Powderblue

Half High: a cross between tall and low varieties 3-4' tall. Do not require the pruning necessary for high bush.

Ex: Legacy, Ozark blue, Northland, Chippewa, Northblue

Enjoy the 'fruits of your labor' and if you have any questions, feel free to call or email the Master Gardener clinic - we are here to help you succeed.