

Tony Glover

Question: Are blueberries hard to grow in our area?

Answer: Blueberries are one of the easiest fruit crops for home gardeners to produce. If you can grow azaleas, you can grow blueberries. Both azaleas and blueberries do well in our acid soils and they can be fertilized with the same type fertilizer. People have used blueberries as a food source for a very long time but we are just now realizing the health benefits they have. For instance, USDA researchers have found that blueberries rank first in antioxidant activity when compared with 40 other fresh fruits and vegetables. Not only are they easy to grow, packed with health benefits but they make a great landscape plant. The blooms are pretty bell shaped white flowers, the fall color is good and the exfoliating bark looks nice in the winter.

In this area we primarily grow two types of blueberries. The most commonly grown is called rabbiteye and the other less common type is the Northern highbush. Northern highbush grows best on elevated sites. The more common rabbiteye blueberry grows well all over the deep south. This is because the rabbiteye is a true southern native. Southern woodlands are often covered with wild rabbiteye blueberries or a close relative. Rabbiteyes are the type I normally encourage homeowners to plant because of their ease of care, fruitfulness, and general adaptability to our climate.

The more adventurous gardener may find some of the newer cultivars of a hybrid blueberry called the Southern highbush. They are from a hybrid cross, between Northern highbush and *Vaccinium darrowii* (a wild blueberry), as well as other species. The Southern highbush was bred to incorporate the superior fruit characteristics of the Northern highbush with the heat tolerance and low chilling requirement of the other species. The Southern highbush is a very temperamental plant and needs special care and attention to grow. Some growers actually plant them on raised beds of pure organic matter and irrigate them. This special attention results in a high quality berry that can be grown farther south and harvested a little earlier than rabbiteye. The fact that it can be grown further south makes it more suited to the Gulf Coast area.

Regardless of the species, one thing all blueberries have in common is a need for high levels of organic matter. When planting blueberries incorporate about ½ bushel of peat moss, compost or fine pine bark all around the plant and in the planting hole. If the soil is poorly drained or heavy clay consider planting on a raised bed like you would for Azaleas. After planting, it is a good idea to mulch the plants with about three inches of mulch. You can plant container grown plant in spring or fall but keep

them well watered throughout the first year. For good fruit production water them during any extended drought especially when the berries are sizing up in June.

Another very important consideration relates to cross pollination. They are generally self incompatible. This means you need at least two varieties that have overlapping blooming periods to get good pollination. If you want a list of suggested varieties you can contact us or go to the following web address:

<http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-1078/>