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News Release

Blueberries: Attractive edible shrubs with benefits **What's not to love about blueberries?**

Question: There is so much “hype” about blueberries lately, how healthy they are and how good for you. But, they’re kind of expensive to buy ... how hard are they to grow in this area?

Answer: The popularity of blueberries (*Vaccinium*) has taken off recently due to several reasons. Blueberries taste good, they are good for us, and while moderately expensive to purchase, they are relatively easy to grow. In addition, they are attractive enough to be included in our landscapes as edible shrubs! Hard to beat that combination of good looks and good taste!

Actually in this area of North America, we grow Rabbiteye blueberries (*Vaccinium ashei*), as opposed to Highbush blueberries, that are usually grown a little further north.

Health benefits of either rabbiteye or highbush blueberries are similar; blueberries are a good source of Vitamin C, aid in the absorption of iron, and promote a healthy immune system. As a source of dietary fiber, blueberries contain manganese, which plays a “starring role” in the development of bones. And, per serving basis, blueberries rank among the highest of those foods exhibiting antioxidant activity.

So what’s not to love about blueberries?

As mentioned a few sentences above, rabbiteye are “our” blueberries, native to the southeastern United States. Rabbiteyes are tolerant of the heat and drought that can control our weather patterns; in fact rabbiteyes grow wild in Alabama and other southern states.

If what has been written so far creates an ‘I gotta have blueberry bushes in my yard/garden/landscape’ feeling, there are a few things to consider before rushing to plant a bounty of blueberries.

Variety selection is important because blueberries must be cross-pollinated to set fruit; therefore we need to plant more than one variety for this to occur. A small bee called appropriately a “blueberry bee” pollinates blueberry flowers almost exclusively during bloom time. Remember that many insecticides can be deadly to all bees and be extremely cautious of ‘what’ and ‘how’ pesticides of any sort are applied.

Site selection and soil preparation are both extremely critical to successful blueberry growth. A site that receives sun all day, with well-aerated, well drained soil high in organic matter is preferred. Blueberries need an acidic soil with a pH between 4.5—5.2. If you're not sure, save yourself time and effort and take a soil test before planting. In an "edible landscape," plant blueberries with azaleas, rhododendrons, and camellias.

Plant blueberries in late fall through late winter, spacing the plants at 5 ft or more apart if planted in a row. When planting, blueberries should be installed at the same depth they were grown in containers. Keep soil around trunks level with surrounding ground – don't pile it up around the bottom of the trunk.

Watering is extremely important in establishing blueberries, especially during the first year. Water thoroughly at planting and then twice weekly until plants are established, if rainfall is not sufficient.

Because plants have ability to retract (take back) water from the berries, enough water, particularly during fruit production, is essential if mouth-watering juicy blueberries are to develop. Blueberries set buds in later summer to early fall, therefore if we're in a dry spell, plants must receive adequate water to fill out the fruit.

Most experts recommend holding off fertilizing blueberries at planting time. A slow release form of fertilizer such as 12-4-1 works fine; follow product labels to avoid over-fertilizing blueberries. Recommendation: do not use nitrate forms of fertilizer for blueberries.

Pruning blueberry plants correctly and at the proper time will help produce new growth and larger fruit. If un-pruned, blueberries may produce smaller, poorer quality fruit. Pruning blueberries stimulates new growth and plant vigor, removes dead or diseased wood, reduces fruit load which makes berries bigger, and keeps plants a manageable size for harvesting the fruit.

Since blueberries have few pests or diseases, they are ideal for those inclined to grow organic foods.

For more information on the attributes of blueberries, go online and search "rabbiteye blueberries," or contact Sallie Lee, Urban Regional Extension Agent-Home Grounds, Gardens and Home Pests at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email leesall@aces.edu. A publication titled "Home Gardening: Rabbiteye Blueberries" is also available online at www.aces.edu.