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News Release

St. Clair Extension Office Offers Blueberry Workshop

Question: Can you give me some tips on growing blueberries in our area?

Answer: Blueberries are one of the easiest fruit crops for home gardeners to grow in Alabama. Generally speaking if you can grow azaleas, you can grow blueberries, but blueberries do need a little more sunlight. 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 only recently realizing the many 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 blueberries easy to grow and 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, not to mention the edible berries.

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, availability 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, between Northern highbush and *Vaccinium darrowi* (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 the Southern highbush can be grown further south makes it more suited to the Gulf Coast area than our area.

Regardless of the species, one thing all blueberries have in common is a need for high levels of organic matter. When planting blueberries I recommend you incorporate lots of peat moss, compost or fine pine bark all around the plant and in the planting hole. If the soil is heavy clay or poorly drained, consider planting on a raised bed like you would for Azaleas.

After planting, it is a good idea to mulch the plants with about two or three inches of mulch. You can plant container grown plants 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 newly planted and when the berries are sizing up in June. Blueberries make fruit buds in the late summer and early fall, so providing some extra water at that time of year can pay dividends the next year.

Another very important consideration relates to cross pollination. Blueberries are generally self incompatible and require cross pollination. 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 your County Extension office or go to the following web address: www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-1078/

To learn even more about growing blueberries, be sure to register now for our Blueberry Workshop scheduled for Friday, May 22nd from 9 a.m.—12 p.m. It will be held at Jefferson State Community College, Pell City campus in room 101. There is a \$5 fee to cover materials and snacks. You must pre-register to attend **NO LATER** than May 15th. Class size is limited to 60. Topics covered will include soil testing, planting, blueberry basics and pruning. To register or for more information please call the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416 to request a registration form or download one from our website at www.aces.edu/stclair. Don't delay, register today. Classes fill quickly.