

Rabbiteye Blueberries

Rabbiteye blueberries are one of the most delicious fruits grown in the South. They are also one of the easiest of fruit plantings to grow. The plant is beautiful, produces delicious fruit, and has few pest problems.

The rabbiteye blueberry, *Vaccinium ashei*, is native to the southeastern United States. This species is tolerant of the heat and drought of the South and grows wild in southern Georgia, Alabama, and the Florida panhandle.

Variety Selection

One of the most important growing requirements of blueberries is their need for cross-pollination in order to set fruit. You will need to plant more than one variety for cross-pollination to occur.

Rabbiteye blueberries have their own special “blueberry bee” that pollinates blueberry flowers almost exclusively during bloom time. Honey bees are usually not as efficient in pollinating but certain other solitary bees, such as the bumble bee, are quite effective.

By selecting several varieties, you can spread out the length of your harvest time. Blueberries do not ripen all at once. One variety may have berries that mature over a 4 to 6 week period. Here are some of the most popular rabbiteye blueberries available in nurseries today, listed by fruiting season.

Blueberry Varieties

Early Season	Mid Season	Late Season
Climax	Tifblue	Centurion
Brightwell	Powderblue	
Beckyblue		
(South Alabama only)		
Premier		

Site Selection And Soil Preparation

If you want your blueberry planting to produce a lot of fruit, select a site that is in full sun. Choose a site with moist, well-aerated, well-drained soil high in organic matter.

Blueberries need an acidic soil with a pH between 4.5 to 5.2 (Take a soil sample before planting blueberries). If you are planting blueberries as a landscape shrub, combine them with other plants that thrive in acid soil, such as azaleas, rhododendrons, and camellias.

The bloom period for many blueberry varieties grown in Alabama occurs at a time when late season frost and freezes can occur. So plant blueberries in the least susceptible location for blooms to be damaged by frost. Plant blueberries away from “frost pockets.” These are low areas and sites that do not have good air movement. You usually can’t do much to protect tender blooms from late season freezes, although newer approaches, including covers, are being evaluated. When selecting a suitable planting site, remember that cold air and frost flow downward just as water does, settling in lowest sites.

Planting

The best time to plant blueberries is in late fall through late winter.

Space the plants at least 5 feet apart in a row. This spacing will result in a hedgerow or border as the plants mature. If you plant several rows of blueberries, space the rows at least 10 to 12 feet apart.

Plant blueberries at the same depth they were grown in their containers. **Do not** pile soil up on the base of the trunk.

When planting an individual plant, make the hole at least twice as wide as the rootball. Amend the soil in the planting hole or row with some form of organic matter (peat moss or compost is best, but finely ground pine bark is satisfactory). Thoroughly incorporate or mix organic matter into the planting hole. Check plants to make sure that they are not root-bound in the container.

Watering

Water is one of the most important needs in establishing and maintaining productive blueberries, particularly during their first year of growth. You should water plants thoroughly at planting and twice weekly for first year until they are established. Water plants for a longer time once or twice per week, rather than for a short time each day.

Because blueberry plants have the ability to retract water from berries, adequate moisture, particularly during fruit production, is essential to producing plump, juicy berries. Blueberries set buds in the late summer/early fall. The plants must receive adequate moisture for plant growth and bud development.

You can place drip irrigation or soaker hoses underneath several inches of mulch, such as chopped leaves, pine needles, ground bark, or other organic mulch. Mulch will keep plants cool and moist, as well as suppress weeds.

Fertilizing

You do not need to apply fertilizer at planting; in fact, it's important not to overfertilize blueberries at any time. A slow release form of fertilizer that has sulfur-coated urea, such as 12-4-1, or an azalea/camellia formulated fertilizer, works well. Follow product label directions or use about 1 ounce of 12-4-1 per plant per year of age (not to exceed 6 ounces in the spring, or 5 ounces on post harvest applications). An organic fertilizer such as cottonseed meal (6-3-2) could be used.

Apply fertilizer twice a year, when spring growth begins, and again after harvest. When spring growth begins, apply a special formulated fertilizer for azaleas/camellias (12-4-1) or cottonseed meal in two applications—when growth begins (March/April) and again in June (2 ounces per plant per application). (Do not use nitrate forms of fertilizer for blueberries)

Pruning

While blueberry plants need less pruning than many other fruit plants, pruning is still very important. Prune blueberry plants to keep them producing new growth and large fruit. Blueberries produce fruit on the growth from the previous season (1-year-old wood). When left unpruned, blueberries produce smaller, poorer quality fruit. Smaller, younger canes produce larger, higher quality fruit.

Pruning is necessary to keep blueberry plantings productive and for good fruit size. The amount of prun-

ing done on blueberries is minimal compared to some fruits, but no less important in maintaining plant vigor. Blueberry plants are vigorous growers putting on a lot of new growth each year.

Pruning controls fruiting potential by opening up the plant for greater sunlight penetration to the foliage. This improves fruit size and set, as well as enhancing color development and taste.

Reasons for pruning blueberries include:

- To stimulate new growth and plant vigor.
- To provide shape or form to plants, especially when used as landscape shrubs.
- To remove dead or diseased wood.
- To reduce fruit load to make berries larger.
- To keep plants a manageable size for harvesting fruit.

After planting, remove about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the height of the plant, and any branches that cross back toward the center of the plant. During the first growing season, remove fruit buds so that the plant will use nutrients and water to develop shoots and roots, not fruit.

Maintain new growth on 2-year and older plants by removing any lower, prostrate growing branches and any weak, diseased, or damaged wood before plants begin growing in the spring. You may also need to prune each year after harvest. For example, you can prune about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the length of tall shoots so that they will support the fruit produced next year.

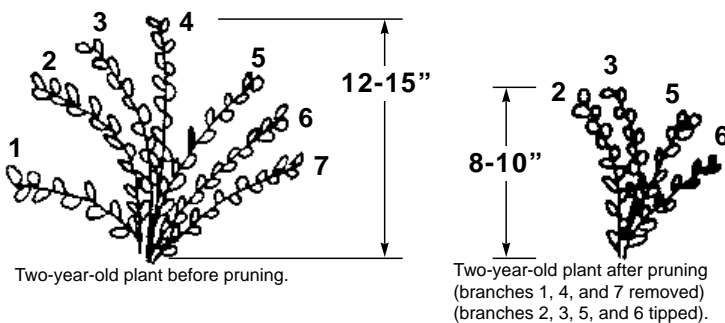
When plants reach a mature size (8 to 10 years old), you'll need to remove some of the old canes each year so they can be replaced with new growth. This is called renewal pruning and it helps to keep the plants healthy and productive. Severe renewal pruning, which reduces the height of plants to 5 feet or less, should only be done every few years after plants reach their mature size.

Controlling Weeds, Diseases, And Insects

Blueberries rarely require any spraying for pests. This makes them an ideal fruit to grow organically.

Harvesting And Storage

Blueberries are easy to pick. To freeze blueberries, spread them out and let the berries dry. Store in plastic containers or freezer bags after harvesting. This keeps berries from sticking together. You can remove berries from the freezer and wash them before using.



Mary Beth Musgrove, *Extension Associate*, Horticulture, Auburn University

For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, and other related acts, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University) offers educational programs, materials, and equal opportunity employment to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status, or disability.

UPS, 10M04, **New Jan 1998**, ANR-1078



ANR-1078