

## BLUEBERRIES IN THE HOME GARDEN

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Blueberries have become very popular over the past few years due to their reported health benefits. Besides being healthy, the berries taste good, and the plants that have colorful branches fit nicely into a home landscape. Planting blueberries and waiting for a harvest takes a bit more patience than other berries since they take about eight to ten years to reach full production. They also tend to be a favorite food of birds, which means that the crop will have to be protected by netting. Finally, the plants are acid-loving, which means that they must find a place in the garden with other acid-loving plants, or have their own space with a modified acidic soil.



Blueberries thrive in well-drained, but constantly moist soil. Their roots need oxygen, so a swampy type of environment is not good. Regular irrigation through a drip system, and a good cover of mulch will provide an ideal environment for the plants as long as the soil is drained. Of all the berry plants, blueberries are the most tolerant of slight spring frosts. They tend to have a crop, even in the years that other berries are frozen out. Still, it is better to look for planting sites that are not susceptible to spring frosts. The planting site should have weed control as well as pH adjustment done the year before planting. pH should be adjusted to somewhere between 4.8 and 5.3. Ground or wettable sulfur, not prills should be used for adjusting pH since it will act faster. Ideally, the application of sulfur will be done the year before planting in the springtime so that the sulfur can react in the soil.



A number of varieties have been developed that are suitable for New York. We will generally choose highbush blueberries for our area, although some folks also grow half-high varieties. Suitable and favored highbush varieties in our area include 'Earliblue', 'Duke', 'Blueray', 'Bluecrop', 'Sierra', 'Toro', and 'Elliot'. Two different varieties should be grown to get the best sized fruit. Half high varieties that are suitable for the coldest parts of New York include those that have "north" associated with the name. 'Northcountry' and 'Northland' are examples.

Some tips for planting should be observed for blueberries in order to have success in growing them. First, I recommend buying bare-rooted plants of two year, or higher grade. If you must buy container grown plants, the soil should be shaken from the roots before planting. Also, any amendments added to the planting hole should be well blended with the native soil. Removal of the pot soil, and blending of amendments with native soil are critical to prevent drying out of the plant during the growing season (a very common problem). Plants should be planted at the same level they were growing in the nursery. Soil should then be watered in so that it can pack around the roots avoiding air pockets. After planting, a layer of mulch about four inches thick can be placed around the plant. Don't fertilize during the first year. About four ounces of ammonium sulfate can be applied to the plant the following year at bloom. Increase the application annually by one ounce until a total of 8 ounces is reached.

The best time to prune blueberry plants is in the early spring so you can assess and remove winter-injured wood. The largest, oldest whole canes should be removed rather than just the branches on them. The ideal mature plant will have about 16 canes, with two canes eight years old. A rhythm should be reached with mature plants so that the oldest two canes will be removed annually leaving the other canes of various ages. All but two of the healthiest and best-placed current year canes should also be removed.

Diseases and insect problems in New York are relatively few. Phomopsis canker can sometimes occur in stems damaged by cold injury. The pith of infected canes becomes discolored and the leaves suddenly wilt. Diseased canes need to be pruned away. Mummy berry can cause young shoots and leaves to wilt and die. Berries that develop from infected flowers turn tan-colored and shrivel. The best prevention is to remove a portion of the top of the mulch, and apply two inches of new mulch. Blueberry maggot can attack the berries and cause them to drop, but this is not normally a serious problem in the Northeast. Deer and birds are probably the most threatening pests, and fences and netting are the best protection.

Berries hang in the bush after they have turned blue, and will sweeten up. This unfortunately makes them quite attractive to birds, so some folks choose to harvest at an earlier, more tart stage. Blueberries keep in the refrigerator easily for more than a week.

*For more information about growing blueberries in the home garden, contact local your Master Gardener or county Cooperative Extension office.*