

Growing blueberries on your deck



By ANNE HARVEY

One beautiful morning at a picturesque vintage summer cottage, while staying with new friends in Indianola twenty years ago, I stepped out into their quiet garden. The sun embraced me together with the shrubs and songbirds present in that moment.

I slowly strolled along a row of lush blueberry bushes, plucking some of the plump juiciest ripest berries into a bowl of breakfast granola splashed with milk. It was a delicious and sensual pleasure; so easily accessible, but too rarely accepted.

We are so fortunate here in Puget Sound. Blueberries are beautiful, hardy, perennial shrubs that thrive in our acid soil and mostly cool, moist growing conditions. With minimal care and attention they bear generous gifts of incredibly flavorful sweet berries.

Ideal container plants

They are ideal container plants. They are strikingly attractive ornamentals year round that also happen to produce delectable berries.

New leaf growth emerges with red tips and then turns deep green with hints of blue and pink it matures. Clusters of tiny white or pink flowers presage the arrival of neat bunches of blue, bead-shaped berries dusted with silvery powder. In the fall the foliage turns flaming red, orange and yellow.

One or two plants will provide plenty of berries for a small family.

The blueberry (*Vaccinium* sp.) is a member of the heath family along with rhododendrons and heathers. Blueberries are one of the few fruits native to America and are classified into three types: southern rabbiteye (*V. ashei*), which tops out at 15 feet; northern high bush (*V. corymbosum*), which grows five to six feet tall; and wild low bush (*V. augustifolium*), which stays about a foot tall. If producing tasty fruit is important, high bush and half-high bush (sometimes known as 'dwarf') varieties are most suitable. Lowbush blueberries are terrific ornamental container plants, but their fruit is less sweet.

Blueberries can easily be grown in containers and flourish if kept well watered and fed regularly with high-nitrogen fertilizer. Containers the size of half-barrels make suitable containers for each high bush blueberry.

Smaller containers are suitable for dwarf and low bush varieties. Dwarf bushes produce abundant small berries with intense flavor. A

single plant usually produces 1 to 2 pints of berries. Planting two different cultivars ensures cross-pollination. Blueberries are self-pollinating, but if you cross-pollinate with another plant, the fruit will be larger, ripen earlier and have fewer seeds.

Soil prep & maintenance

Fill the containers with an acid soil mix within 6 to 8 inches of the rim, leaving enough room to add a thick layer of moisture-retentive mulch. If you plant in plastic tubs add a few heavy rocks or bricks so they won't tip over in the wind. Soil-less mixes for Rhododendrons are ideal. Otherwise, look for mixes containing three parts sand, three parts peat moss and two parts composted chopped leaves.

Good plant growth requires a pH of 4.0 to 5.0 (fairly acidic); the plants will not live in soils with a pH above 5.5. The plants' feeder roots are very close to the surface and do not have root hairs; therefore, good soil moisture management and heavy mulches will be needed.

If your soil needed no amendments to correct

almost to the ground. Low bush Blueberries are short and spreading, with branches almost to the ground. This type doesn't need to be pruned, though you can thin out the oldest, most unproductive branches. Blueberries will be productive for years without ever being pruned except for convenient harvesting. No pruning is needed for first two or three years after planting.

Once pruning is necessary, it should be done in late winter. Blueberries bear fruit on year-old and older branches. If you cut back too much, you won't have much of a crop. Once the plants are established, begin pruning to control the height of the taller varieties.

Weak or unproductive branches should be removed first. Sometimes, a harsh winter will kill off some or even all of a blueberry's branches; cut off these damaged branches at an outward-facing node where healthy wood begins.

The payoff

Depending on the type and variety of your plants, Blueberries ripen from mid- to late summer over a period of two weeks or longer.

The berries don't ripen all at one time.

The "Bluecrop" high bush season lasts a month. Turning blue is a sign of ripening, not a sign of ripeness. Most Blueberries turn blue one to two weeks before they're ready to pick. Ripe berries will twist off the stems easily. A taste test is another way to tell if harvest time has arrived.

Pests and diseases are rare, but if the plants are stressed problems can arise. If this happens, contact the King County Cooperative Extension office for helpful information.

Birds are keen connoisseurs of blueberries. Thrushes and other songbirds will be the most problematic. Plastic mesh bird netting draped temporarily during berry ripening works well. Make sure there are no gaps or openings and secure it to the bases of the canes. If birds reach through the mesh, suspend it on a frame a foot or so above the berries.

Blueberry plants flower in spring, with flowers at the tip of canes and the tip of the cluster opening first. If pollination does not occur within 3 days after flower opening, fruit set is not likely to occur.

Fruit development occurs for about two to three months after bloom, depending on cultivar, weather, and plant vigor. Sugar content of fruit will increase and fruit size continues to increase after fruit turns blue. Taste the fruit to determine the time to harvest.

Blueberries in containers will come through our fairly mild Puget Sound winters fine with enough insulation. Mulch the roots with a thick layer of leaves and wrap the plant in burlap for extra protection in extreme temperatures. Be sure to water them during the winter months whenever needed.

So, if you are fond of eating blueberries, or just want a low-maintenance and attractive screen plant on your deck, consider adding a couple of blueberry bushes. Imagine stepping out on your own deck on a warm sunny morning and picking blueberries for breakfast. Life doesn't get much better.

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the pH, each spring the mulch around each plant should be pulled back and 1/2 to 1 pound of high-nitrogen organic fertilizer should be applied.

and Azaleas can be used for Blueberries, although a little less fertilizer than the recommended amount should be used. If the foliage turns yellow and then red, when they should be green it indicates a nitrogen deficiency. Correct this immediately by adding high-nitrogen liquid fertilizer along with a fast-acting foliar spray.

Blueberry roots are associated with mycorrhizal fungi in the soil. These fungi aid the blueberry plant in nutrient absorption. Many of the soil management practices recommended for blueberries may actually benefit the fungus, not the plant, so using organic fertilizer and dechlorinated water is preferred.

Blueberries are easily maintained as they naturally grow in a neat shape. High bush Blueberries grow erect to slightly spreading, with the several stems producing side branches



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