

Sky Nursery

BLUEBERRIES

Blueberries are deciduous (mostly) fruiting shrubs with ornamental fall foliage color. Many even offer colorful winter bark. They make handsome plants for a hedge or border and are easily incorporated into the landscape. Most varieties grow about 4-6 feet tall; some have a more erect habit and others are more spreading. Many dwarf varieties are also available. Plant 3 feet apart for an informal hedge, 4 to 5 feet apart otherwise.

Blueberries thrive in conditions that suit rhododendrons and azaleas. They need full sun and cool, moist soil that drains well. Blueberries are very shallow-rooted; be careful not to cultivate deeply around their bases. Weeds, lack of ample water, and birds will limit yields. Mulching with compost or bark will limit competition from weeds and conserve moisture. A light mulch at planting time, increased to a depth of 6 inches over a period of years, is ideal. On hot days blueberries will use about 2 gallons of water per plant. Too much fluctuation between dry and wet soil is the worst thing for blueberries.

Do not prune until the plants are 3 to 4 years old. This allows the plant to build strength and make maximum growth. Fruit buds for the following year are produced on new shoots. Removing old branches forces this new growth, thus assuring adequate and vigorous fruiting wood. Pruning in general will tend to reduce the number of berries but will increase their size and speed their maturation. Prune during the dormant season. On older bushes, remove a few older canes or cut them back to a strong lateral (side branch). Remove low spreading branches near the ground, as berries on them get dirty easily. Thin the shorter, weaker fruiting twigs on varieties that produce too many fruit buds.

It is important to plant two different varieties to ensure cross-pollination for fruit set. Any two varieties will cross-pollinate regardless of ripening time. Thinning the blossoms or green berries may promote larger fruit and a healthier bush.

Fertilizing blueberries is governed by the length of the new shoot growth on mature canes. Plants that make little or no shoot growth should receive the maximum recommended amount. Plants that make 1 foot or more of new shoot growth need little or no fertilizer. Where soils are highly organic, blueberries may require little or no fertilizer. If growth is slow, use a fertilizer formulated for acid-loving plants around mid-March at the rate recommended for that size shrub. Exercise caution when fertilizing young plants (1 to 2 years old) because fertilizer easily damages their roots.

Fruits will mature between July 1 and October 1, depending on the variety. Berries are produced in clusters and ripen in succession over a period of time before full maturity of flavor is reached. Try to delay picking until a fair quantity of berries acquires full size and flavor. They will become sweeter the longer they hang on the bush. Put netting over the bushes if birds become a problem. You can expect 5 pounds of fruit per mature large highbush plant.

Varieties differ as to the size of the scar when you pick the berry (the small puckered area at the top of the berry where you pluck it off the stem). The smaller the scar, the better the berry will keep under refrigeration or freezing. Scar size does not affect the berry flavor.

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Mummyberry can sometimes be a problem; it kills blossoms and shrivels berries. Destroy all affected fruit and clean up leaves around plants each fall.

Recent research has sparked interest in the health benefits of blueberries. One serving of blueberries (1/2 cup, if you can eat that few) has only 43 calories—but it provides 8% of the RDI for fiber, 16% for Vitamin C, and more antioxidants than five servings of most other fruits or vegetables. Regular consumption of blueberries has been linked to improved eye sight, lower cholesterol, improved urinary tract health, and reducing problems associated with aging, including improving memory and motor skills, inhibiting skin wrinkles, and alleviating arthritis. See <http://www.blueberrycouncil.org/nutrition.php> for current research.

HIGHBUSH AND HALF-HIGHBUSH VARIETIES 2012

Bluecrop: Midseason. Medium to large, loose clusters of large, firm, crack-resistant, light blue fruit. Small scar. High quality fruit with good subacid flavor. Good for fresh eating, preserves, baking and freezing. Vigorous, upright growth will reach 4 to 6 feet at maturity. Tendency to overbear. Light red bark in winter.

Bluegold: Midseason. Medium to large, light blue fruit with good sweet flavor. Compact rounded bush grows 3 to 5 feet tall and wide. Bright yellow fall foliage.

Bluejay: Early midseason. Medium size light blue fruit. Fruit stays on the bush a long time without loss of quality. Flavor is mild and slightly tart; berry is firm and juicy, excellent for muffins and pies. Vigorous and very productive, grows 5 to 6 feet tall at maturity. Orange to red fall color.

Chandler: Mid to late season. Extremely large fruit—cherry size! Sweet delicious flavor. Extended ripening season of up to six weeks, providing a good supply of berries for fresh eating. Vigorous grower, slightly spreading habit to 5 to 6 feet tall. Cold hardy.

Darrow: Late season. Very heavy production of very large (up to the size of a quarter), tart, flavorful, light blue berries. Plants are 6-8' tall, very vigorous, upright. Vibrant scarlet fall color.

Duke: Early season. Medium to large size light blue berries. Mildly tart flavor. Small scar. Very firm, retains freshness longer than other varieties. Blooms late but ripens early. Heavy, consistent producer. Yellow orange foliage in fall.

Earliblue: Very early season. The first to ripen! Medium-large, firm, light blue fruit in long, loose clusters. Resists cracking. Medium scar. Good dessert quality—sweet, aromatic flavor. Good cling. Vigorous, erect growth habit to 5 to 6 feet tall. Bright red bark in winter.

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Hardiblu: Midseason. Hardiblu is an old established variety in the Northwest that is known for its superior flavored, exceptionally sweet berry. Hardiblu has a reputation for being quite adaptable to many soil types, including heavier clay soils. The upright vigorous bush supports heavy crops of medium-sized, dark blue fruit perfect for muffins and pancakes. Brilliant yellow-orange foliage in the fall gives way to dark-red wood in winter.

Jersey: Late season. Easy to grow, heavy producing variety. Old favorite of home gardeners for its reliable production of dark blue, small to medium very sweet and spicy fruit. Excellent variety for pies and preserves! Very large bush can reach 7' at maturity. Yellow fall color; yellow winter wood.

Legacy: Midseason. Large light blue fruit with robust flavor. Rated one of the best in USDA trials. Vigorous and very productive, growing 4 to 6 feet tall at maturity. Bright orange fall foliage. Evergreen in mild winters.

Liberty: Late season. Very heavy production of large berries with nice balanced sweet-tart flavor makes this a new favorite. 6-8' tall, very vigorous. Bright red to orange fall color.

Northland: Early midseason. Most cold hardy highbush variety. 4 feet tall and wide at maturity. Dark blue medium sized fruit, excellent for jams and baking because of their high sugar content. Very productive plant-can produce over 20 pounds of berries per bush when mature.

Patriot: Early season. Dark blue, large, highly flavored berries. Low growing, spreading to 4 feet. Very cold hardy. Fiery orange fall color.

Pink Lemonade: Mid to late season. Firm, sweet fruit is bright pink when ripe—very unusual, but with true blueberry flavor. 5-6' foot plant is highly ornamental, with a vigorous upright form, glossy foliage, pinkish-white flowers in spring and the distinctive pink berries in the summer. Fall foliage is golden to orange; winter twigs are reddish-brown.

Reka: Early season. Medium to large size dark blue berries. Tart and flavorful. Reka was bred in New Zealand; it is tolerant of a wide range of soil types. Very vigorous plant. Burgundy fall color.

Spartan: Early. One of the most attractive and best-flavored berries. Light blue, very large (often covering a quarter) fruit has a tangy, sweet, delicious flavor. Plant requires well draining soil with lots of organic matter. Upright bush to 5-6 feet. Orange-yellow fall color.

Toro: Midseason. Very large, sky-blue fruit in full heavy clusters. Vigorous stocky bush grows 4-6 feet. Outstanding sprightly flavor. Excellent ornamental with bronzy new foliage, pink-tinged flowers, and bright red fall color. Light red twigs in winter.

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HALF Highbush Varieties 2012

The half-high cultivars are eastern wild blueberries or crosses between northern highbush and wild blueberries. They are low growing, compact bushes, bred for their exceptional cold tolerance. Fruit yields are generally lower than highbush varieties but berry quality is very good with an intense “wild” flavor. They are an excellent choice for the limited-space garden, growing on the average from 12 to 18 inches tall and spreading 24 to 36 inches across. A few varieties approach highbush size.

Brunswick: Midseason. Pea size, firm, light blue fruit with wild blueberry flavor. Dwarf plant growing only about 1 foot tall and 5 feet wide. Waxy deep green foliage turns fiery red and orange in the fall. This one is a selection of a wild blueberry, not a cross. Extremely hardy.

Chippewa: Midseason. Large, sweet, light blue fruit. Very good quality fruit with excellent flavor. 3 to 4 feet tall and wide; fiery red fall foliage.

Top Hat: Midseason. The pea size, firm, light blue fruit has wild blueberry flavor. Dwarf plant growing 1½ feet tall and wide. Nicely defined shape, excellent for containers and bonsai.

Southern Highbush Varieties 2012

The Southern highbush varieties have been bred for good fruit production with lower winter chilling requirements. They are evergreen or semi-evergreen, depending on the variety and the severity of the winter. Unlike the Northern varieties, Southern Highbush blueberries are self-fertile—you can get berries with a single bush. However, fruit set will be heavier if you plant another blueberry variety for cross-pollination.

Bountiful Blue: Midseason. Big clusters of large sweet fruit. Semi dwarf grows to 3 feet high and 4 wide. Semi-evergreen foliage is gorgeous blue-green.

Sunshine Blue: Midseason. Dime size sweet and slightly tangy fruit—produced for up to 9 weeks. Semi dwarf, compact grower to 3 feet. Hot pink flowers fade to white. Semi-evergreen. Ornamental and productive.