Blueberries

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If you love blueberries, but balk at the price retailers ask for these tasty blue morsels, it is time to consider growing your own. Blueberries may not be the easiest crop to grow, but with careful variety selection and a little knowledge of the soil conditions they demand, gardeners across a wide range of climates can successfully produce home grown supplies.

FACT FILE
Botanical Name: *Vaccinium species*
Family: *Ericaceae*
Origin: *Europe and America*
Soil Type and Climatic Range: *Blueberries are related to rhododendrons and require similar growing conditions. Acid soil containing high levels of organic matter, perfect drainage and regular watering are required to achieve optimum growth. Careful selection of varieties allows plants to be grown across a range of cold, cool temperate and even subtropical climates.*
Description: *Blueberries are long-lived, medium to tall shrubs. Plants may be evergreen or fully deciduous depending on growing conditions and the variety selected. Terminal clusters of white or pink flowers are followed by small, blue fruits with a waxy bloom.*
Harvest Period: *Blueberries are harvested from July to April with peak production in the period from November to January.*

Success Lies in the Soil

The key to successful blueberry culture lies in the soil. Blueberries require an acid soil with a pH of between 4 and 5. Ph levels above or below this seriously impede nutrient availability with deficiencies of iron and zinc a common occurrence. Incorrect soil pH results in poor growth, few flowers and poor fruiting.

Where the soil pH requires correction, powdered sulphur should be added several months prior to planting. Perfect drainage and high levels of organic matter are required for successful blueberry culture. Be sure to add plenty of acidic compost, coir peat, composted sawdust or decomposed cow manure well in advance of planting. Avoid agricultural lime, Dolomite, shell grit, wood ash, chicken manure or any other material that is likely to increase the soil pH. If using mushroom compost or bagged commercial manure products be sure to check the pH in advance of incorporating the material into the soil as it may be alkaline.

Stop the Rot

Perfect drainage is essential as blueberries are prone to root rot disease. Adding compost and coarse washed river sand to the soil can help to improve drainage.

Root damage may also be caused by fertiliser burn. Blueberries are extremely sensitive to fertiliser applications, including applications of animal manure, blood and bone or other organic nutrients. You must also always consider the effect that additional nutrition may have on soil pH. Check the pH of all products before applying them to plants. Fortnightly applications of liquid fish and seaweed products will promote strong root growth and enhanced production. Mulching with acidic compost may also provide a slow release source of nutrients.

Plant Now

Blueberries are available through nurseries at most times of the year, but you may need to place an order for specific varieties. They can be planted out at any time of year. Bare rooted plants may be available in cooler regions in winter, but plants are more commonly sold in pots or bags. Commercial growers establish plants at 1.5 – 2 metre intervals with 3-4 metres between rows. Avoid root disturbance when planting.

Sun Lovers

Full sun positions provide improved flowering and fruit production in cooler climates, but blueberries will grow in up to fifty percent shade. Shade is beneficial in warmer climates.

Plants require protection from buffeting winds and shelterbelts or shade cloth screens may need to be installed in exposed sites. Where growing conditions are ideal, blueberries can be used as low hedges or background shrubbery in an herbaceous garden.

Watering and Mulching

Blueberries require even soil moisture. Keeping plants well mulched can assist in maintaining uniform soil moisture levels. It will also reduce soil temperature fluctuations and reduce any burning that may be associated with soil-applied nutrients. Bark, wood chips, sawdust, pine needles, straw, coir peat, leaf litter or acidic compost may be used. Keeping plants well mulched reduces weed competition and the need for cultivation that can damage the shallow root system. Good quality water supplies with low levels of dissolved salts are essential. Use rainwater in preference to tap or bore water where possible.

Pot Options

Where soil conditions are unsuitable, blueberries can be grown quite successfully in pots. Large glazed pots or half wine barrels make ideal containers. Potted specimens must not be allowed to dry out and should be mulched in the same manner as garden grown plants. Connecting several potted plants to a drip irrigation system with an automatic timer will help to ensure pots remain consistently moist.

Propagation

Blueberries propagate relatively easily from hardwood cuttings taken during winter and soft, tip cuttings taken during summer. If you know someone who grows great blueberries in your region, why not ask them for a cutting. That way you are sure of getting a variety proven to perform in your climate.

Potential Harvest

It takes several seasons before plants reach their full productive potential, but once established mature plants can yield between 4-7kg depending on the variety grown. While a single blueberry plant will generally set fruit, improved production is achieved by planting two or more different cultivars from the same parent group to facilitate cross-pollination. Flowering times will tend to overlap, but different varieties mature at slightly different times. By planting different varieties it is possible to achieve fruit production over an extended period.

Many varieties of blueberries are well suited to freezing. Frozen blueberries are fairly readily available in supermarkets and the fruit also finds its way into jam, ice-cream, desserts, pies, muffins and sauces.

Pruning

Prune out dead wood and weak growth. Keep the centre of the plant open to maximise light and airflow through the plant. Prune off any flowers that form during the first season to encourage plants to put energy into vegetative growth.

Pretty Pricey

Blueberries are typically sold in 150gm punnets. With retail prices anywhere between $4 - $6.50 a punnet, you could be paying over $43 per kilogram to indulge your passion.

Why the Expense?

Most blueberries sold in Australia are hand picked with suppliers employing huge labour forces to harvest crops in peak season. Not all berries in a cluster ripen at one time, so the bushes must be re-picked on several different occasions. When compared to other fruits, fresh blueberries have a relatively short shelf life. They require rapid cooling after harvest, efficient dispatch, careful handling and a quick turnover in retail outlets if consumers are to be provided with a quality product.

Nature's Vitamin Pill
Blueberries are packed with antioxidants, high in fibre, loaded with vitamins A, C and K and contain high levels of calcium, potassium and zinc.

Pest and Disease Susceptibility
When grown under appropriate conditions, blueberries are relatively free of pest and disease problems. Outbreaks of powdery mildew can be controlled with organic fungicides such as wettable sulphur or copper. Birds love blueberries, so be sure to protect your crop. Use shade cloth, frost cloth or pest netting at first fruit set. This will not only discourage birds, but also ensure fruit are free from larvae in fruit fly prone regions.

Varieties
Highbush
These varieties have their origins in colder regions of North American with many selections being further developed by New Zealand growers. They are semi-deciduous and have a high chill requirement (750 – 1200 hours). This makes them well suited to colder climates. Commercial varieties include Reka, Nui, Northland, Puru, Denise, Bluecrop, Bluerose, Brigitta, Caroline, Darrow and Elliot.

Southern Highbush
These varieties have their origins in the southern states of America. They are mostly evergreen and are considered low chill varieties (250 – 600 hours). Varieties include O'Neil and Reveille.

Rabbiteye
These varieties have their origins in Florida. They are evergreen and are considered low chill varieties (450 – 600 hours). Varieties include Backyard Blue, Brightwell, Centurion, Climax, Gulfcoast, Maru, Powderblue, Premier, Sharpblue, Sunshine Blue, Tifblue and Rahi.

When attempting to source the best varieties for your region take advice from specialist fruit tree nurseries in your area.