Blueberries

If you like having fresh fruit, but do not want to spend a ton of time maintaining a crop, then blueberries could be for you. Homeowners throughout our state should consider planting rabbiteye blueberries in March for fresh fruit. There are several compelling reasons why blueberries are an excellent fruit for every gardener to grow:

- are southeast natives, and so are largely adapted to our climate and pests,
- are adaptable to varying soil conditions,
- do not require trellising or staking,
- attract pollinators and are attractive shrubs that can offer excellent fall color,
- are highly nutritious and offer many health benefits,
- are very easy to preserve,
- are perennial plants and can provide good yields for 10 to 20 years.

The first task is to determine a suitable planting location. The three site requirements to bear in mind when selecting a planting location are: amount of sunlight, soil drainage and available space. Blueberries require a minimum of eight hours of bright sunlight for good yields of high quality fruit.

The soil needs to drain reasonably well. Test the soil drainage in a site by digging a 12 by 12-inch hole and filling it with water. Let the water drain completely. Refill the hole and measure the rate of drainage with a yardstick and a watch. If the water is draining four inches or more an hour, there is excellent drainage. However, in clay soils I would proceed with a site if the water drained at least an inch per hour. If the water is draining less than an inch per hour, then there is poor drainage and another site should be chosen.

Rabbiteye blueberries need plenty of space to grow, and two or more varieties are needed for complete pollination. Plant these in a five-foot wide row with six feet between plants. That said, you may certainly plant them anywhere else you would like with any given spacing, but the dimensions above will maximize fruit yields. If more than one row is planned, put each row 10 to 12 feet away from the next. This seems like it may be overboard, but trust me these plants get large!

Once the site has been chosen, submit a soil sample through your local Extension office for analysis. A target range pH for blueberries is 5.0 to 5.4. Within the planting site, lay out the five-foot wide row(s), and till them down about six inches. After the initial tillage, run the tiller through the row again adding organic matter to incorporate. Peat moss, composted pine bark, a
1:1 mixture of peat and builders sand or rotted sawdust can be used for this purpose. Once that is thoroughly incorporated throughout the row, use a rake or a plow to form a ridge or berm in the middle of the row. Ideally the ridge or berm will be about six inches higher than the surrounding grade. Blueberries are very shallow-rooted, and this ensures excellent drainage. Choosing the site and preparing the soil is the hardest and most critical part of growing rabbiteye blueberries.

Nursery grown plants that are two or three years old and one to three feet tall will transplant nicely in March. Here are some suggestions for rabbiteye blueberry varieties to plant, listed in order of ripening from earliest to latest with some overlap:

- 'Premier'
- 'Brightwell'
- 'Ira'
- 'Powderblue'
- 'Titan'
- 'Ochlockonee'

If you only have room for three plants, then chose three different varieties that will extend the harvest and hedge against the risk of a late spring frost. When planting, try to set the plant in the soil at the same depth as it was in the container or at the topmost root if you order bare-root plants. Use a surface mulch two to three inches deep of pine bark or pine straw. This will help to keep weeds down and the roots moist and cool. Do not fertilize immediately after planting. Refer to the soil sample recommendations for future fertility needs. Realize that plants will likely not reach full fruit-bearing potential until several years in the ground, but the fresh fruit is well worth the effort.

For more information on blueberry culture, please see HGIC 1401, Blueberry.

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