



For a Sweet Treat, Try Growing Blueberries

By Kaelin Smith, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Blueberries are a summer staple in New England. They are native to North America and have a rich history that dates back hundreds of years. Despite their origin, these delicious fruits have only been cultivated for about 100 years. Prior to being mass produced, Native Americans foraged blueberries for food and other parts of the plant for medicinal practices. It is because of shared knowledge from Native Americans that we have such a comprehensive understanding of cultivating and utilizing blueberries.

There are two main types of blueberries that are grown in New England: Highbush and Lowbush. Highbush blueberries (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) can grow up to six feet tall while Lowbush (*Vaccinium angustifolium*) have a creeping habit. Both types can be planted in Connecticut, but Lowbush tend to be more cold hardy. They are often used as a groundcover more so than for fruit production. Blueberries are perennial bushes and can also make a beautiful addition to landscapes year-round. Their white, urn-shaped flowers bloom in the spring and eventually lead to bright blue-purple berries all summer long. As the weather cools down, their leaves turn bright red and eventually fall off to reveal tangled branches that stand out in a winter landscape.

There are many pick-your-own blueberry farms but having your own personal supply of tasty berries is easier than you may think. Blueberries have a reputation of being finicky and difficult to grow. They are most notably known to be very particular with the soil they prefer. Luckily, New England is the ideal location for blueberry production, as the native soil tends to be more acidic. A soil pH of 4.0 to 5.0 are optimal for the best possible crop. If you are unsure of the pH of your soil you can send a sample to the UConn Soil Nutrient Analysis Laboratory. Soils that are not acidic enough can be amended by adding elemental sulfur prior to planting. Another factor to consider about planting blueberries is soil moisture. Their fibrous root system does not extend deep into the soil profile, making it difficult for them to absorb and nutrients from surrounding soil. Keeping the soil moist will help the roots retain water, allowing them to continuously produce berries. If your location is not conducive to growing blueberries, bushes can also be grown in pots with drainage holes. An acidic potting mix and a layer of mulch will ensure that ideal cultural conditions are met. Aside from drainage and pH, one main challenge of

growing blueberries is that they are a bird's favorite snack. There are various ways to keep birds from eating your berries, but netting is by far the most effective. Bushes are usually encased in net cages to exclude birds.



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Berries are harvested about two months after flowers bloom from June to August. Mature bushes can produce anywhere from one to twenty-five pounds of berries, depending on the variety. It takes three years for plants to produce fruit and about six years for maximum production. It may take a while, but this reward is well worth the wait!

Blueberry season has almost passed, but there is still time to enjoy this antioxidant rich fruit. Try incorporating them into baked goods, eating them fresh, or freezing them for later use. The possibilities are endless.

For information on growing blueberries or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.