

Blueberries can answer the garden's call



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Question: I would love to grow some type of fruit in my garden. It seems like many fruit trees need so much care and pruning. What would you recommend?

Answer: We are lucky here in Douglas County to live in an area that is ideal for growing many types of fruit. However, for sheer production in a small space and ease of care, my vote would be for blueberries!

The blueberry plant also is very ornamental and can fit into your landscape quite easily. It has attractive white or pink blooms in the spring, berries in the summer, and beautiful yellow and red foliage and bark in the fall and winter. You can grow blueberries right in your ornamental beds if you keep in mind some of their cultural requirements.

There are several types of blueberry plants. The Northern Highbush type of blueberry is the one most recommended for our area. Some of the most common cultivars here are Duke, Spartan, Bluecrop, Liberty, and Darrow (listed in order of ripening time, early to late).

The Southern Highbush type is not recommended in our area. Other types are Lowbush (not recommended), Northern/Southern hybrids (Legacy does well in our area), and half-highs (useful for container plantings).

The various cultivars vary in berry size, flavor and fruiting season. It is recommended to always have more than one cultivar because even though they may be self-pollinating, they will produce much better-quality fruit if there are two different cultivars.

The good news is all blueberries bloom at the same time, regardless of when their fruit ripens. Oregon State University Extension has detailed information online about blueberry cultivars.

Choose a location that receives full sun and has well-drained soil. Blueberries will not tolerate wet or heavy soils but sometimes you can overcome this with raised beds or mounded rows.

They require an acid soil (pH 4.5-5.5) and many areas in our area have native soils with this ideal pH. They like soils high



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Critters other than deer or birds may find your blueberries irresistible.



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in organic matter. Use amendments with low pH such as sawdust/bark from firs, pine or most hardwoods.

The best time to plant blueberries is fall and spring. Blueberries have very shallow root systems and appreciate a good mulch layer to help conserve water, prevent weeds and keep the pH on the acid side.

Blueberries are not tolerant of drought. Established plants need 1 1/2-3 inches of water per week in the summer. Drip irrigation is ideal as it conserves water and reduces weed

problems and disease. The soil should be wet 6-12 inches down after irrigating.

Use a fertilizer like one you would use for other acid-loving plants. The main nutrient need is the ammonium source of nitrogen (N). Many all-purpose fertilizers contain the nitrate source of N and are not suitable for blueberries. Best fertilizers are ammonium sulfate (21-0-0), urea and rhododendron food (9-15-13). Organic options are cottonseed meal, feather meal and fish emulsion.

Pruning blueberries is

minimal compared to many other berries or fruits. Prune Northern highbush cultivars yearly to remove weak and dead wood. Prune to promote strong new growth and maintain fruit quality. Berries are formed on 1-year-old wood. You will want to remove the flower buds in the first year to have a newly-planted bush direct its energy to producing a strong plant.

Pull weeds by hand to avoid root damage. Glyphosate and 2,4-D herbicides should not be used near your blueberries.

Intense heat can damage ripening fruit – erect some shade if a heat wave is during harvest time.

Birds and deer are the critters most likely to cause damage. It is best to fence out deer and use bird-repellent measures or netting to keep the birds away. I have had surprisingly good success with inflated owls and mylar ribbons.

The spotted wing drosophila can be a pest in our area. The female lays eggs on the ripening fruit. You can use fine netting to exclude the adult flies just before the fruit starts to show color. Problems are more likely with later varieties.

Blueberries are one of the most rewarding crops I grow. I have six mature plants and picked over 50 pounds of fruit the summer before last. Blueberries are easy to grow, good for you and simple to freeze for tasty muffins in January. Make some room for blueberries!

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.