

Blueberries As Landscape Plants

Blueberries have many attributes that make them valuable yet frequently overlooked and underutilized landscape plants. They have something to offer in all four seasons. Bells-shaped white flowers appear in the spring and during the summer the glossy green leaves and blue berries are attractive. Autumn foliage on blueberries can be as attractive as the most stunning sugar maple. Leaf color ranges from yellow-orange to fiery scarlet red. During the winter the rugged twiggy branches add interest and texture to the landscape.

Blueberry plants come in different sizes and forms

They can be large and upright like 'Spartan', moderate in height and spreading like 'Bluetta', or low and small in stature such as the lowbush blueberry. Blueberries can be used individually as specimen plants or grouped for effect into larger clustered plantings. They can also be planted 3 feet apart as a hedge to form an attractive yet effective barrier. They make an excellent ground cover but it may require several years to completely fill the allotted space. The lowbush blueberry and 'Northsky' are the lowest, rarely reaching 18 inches in height. The half-high varieties: 'Friendship', 'North Country' and 'Northblue' would be more appropriate as a ground cover where a height of 20 to 30 inches is desired. Insect and disease control is generally not required if plants are kept vigorous and healthy.

Blueberries are relatively easy to grow but there are several key cultural things that must be done.

- **Adjust soil pH.** Blueberries are acid-loving plants like rhododendrons and azalea and therefore require a soil pH of 4.5 to 5.2. The pH of most garden and lawn soils is too high for blueberries. Elemental sulfur is the best and easiest way to lower soil pH. Have the soil pH tested before planting. Yellowing of the area between leaf veins on young shoots is an easy way to identify high soil pH where blueberries are already growing.
- **Prepare soil.** Blueberries have fine shallow roots with no root hairs. Soil should be cool and moist (never wet). A sandy loam that is high in organic matter is best. Generally 10 to 15 quarts of peat is mixed with the soil at planting time and placed around the roots. Plants should be mulched with 6 to 8 inches of aged wood chips, bark or partially rotted sawdust. This should be renewed annually. Straw or leaves can be used but are not as good. During dry years, supplemental water may be necessary.
- **Defruit.** Blueberries do not grow fast and the presence of fruit nearly always stops growth of young plants. Therefore, all fruit should be removed from the plants for the first four years.
- **Prune.** Once blueberries approach full size they should be pruned annually in March or April. Pruning is easy and requires very little time. Remove one to three of the oldest canes each year. This may amount to up to 25% of the whole plant. This will stimulate vegetative growth and keep the plant growing vigorously. Detailed and time-consuming pruning is generally not required. Lowbush blueberries are frequently pruned every two to three years by mowing the whole plant down to ground level with a mower before growth

starts in the spring. This will stimulate vigorous new growth. No blueberries are harvested in the year of pruning if lowbush blueberries are mowed.

CHARACTERISTICS OF BLUEBERRY PLANTS THAT MAY BE USEFUL IN THE LANDSCAPE

Variety	Plant height	Plant habit	Fall leaf color	Season of ripening
Berkley	5-6 ft.	Spreading	Orange	Midseason
Bluecrop	4-6 ft.	Upright	Fiery red	Midseason
Blueray	5-7 ft.	Upright & spreading	Yellow-orange	Midseason
Bluetta	3-5 ft.	Compact spreading	Orange	Very early
Collins	4-6 ft.	Upright	Red	Midseason
Elliot	5-7 ft.	Upright	Orange-red	Very late
Friendship	24 in.	Low	Brilliant orange-red	Midseason
Jersey	5-7 ft.	Upright spreading	Yellow-orange	Late midseason
North Country	18-24 in.	Low	Fiery red	Midseason
Northblue	20-30 in.	Low	Dark red	Late midseason
Northsky	10-18 in.	Very low	Dark red	Late midseason
Patriot	4-6 ft.	Open spreading	Orange-red	Early midseason
Rancocas	5-7 ft.	Upright spreading	Red	Late midseason
Spartan	5-7 ft.	Upright open	Orange-red	Early

- **Plant Pollinizers.** More than one variety should be planted because blueberries are considered to be partially self-incompatible. If more than one variety is planted, more fruit will set, fruit will be larger and they will ripen earlier.

Consider blueberries as you think about plants that you may add to your landscape this year. They are attractive year round and if covered with netting they can provide wonderful tasting fruit in July and August. If plants are left unprotected, they will attract many different kinds of birds to your yard.

UMass Extension Agriculture and Landscape Program 4/12

UMass Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer, United States Department of Agriculture cooperating. Contact your local Extension office for information on disability accommodations. Contact the State Extension Director's Office if you have concerns related to discrimination, 413-545-4800 or see www.extension.umass.edu/civilrights/.