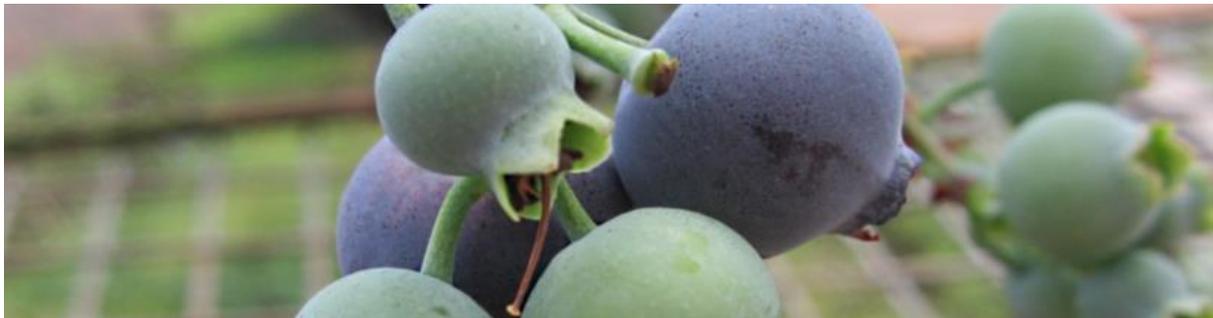


Mountain Blue Farms - Blueberry Growing Guide



Please find below our Growing Guide for blueberries. It covers all aspects of growing blueberries at home such as soil requirements, planting, mulch, water, fertiliser, pruning and harvest.



SOIL

The key issues regarding the suitability of various soil types are as follows:

SOIL pH. - Blueberries are acid loving plants that do best in soils with a pH in the range from 4.5 to 5.5. The soils outside this range may be modified either with elemental sulphur (where the pH is too alkaline) or lime/dolomite (where the pH is too acidic). It is important to remember that where soils are modified as such, deficiencies or toxicities of some elements may occur.

SOIL STRUCTURE/AERATION - This may be the most important factor in the success of mulching with pine bark. Blueberries have a very fine fibrous root system that needs a porous medium in which to grow, similar to the coarse sand in which they originated. Careful soil preparation, including the establishment of high mounds and the use of weed matting or polyethylene strips to cover the mounds to prevent compaction of the soils underneath, is very beneficial to the growth and establishment of a healthy root system.



CLIMATE

There are several issues involving the climatic suitability of an area. The most important of which are the availability of winter chilling and the likelihood of frosts during the periods of flowering and fruiting. Chilling refers to the hours where the temperature drops below 7 degrees and these hours are necessary for blueberry plants to set fruit and flower. Different varieties require different amounts of chilling hours to mature successfully. According to the Australian Blueberry Growers Association, Southern Highbush varieties are low chill and require 250-600 chill hours per season while Northern Highbush varieties are high chill and require 750-1000 and Rabbiteye varieties require 450-600 chill hours.



A lack of chilling during the winter months may lead to problems of late leafing hence causing stress to the plant as it ripens the fruit without enough leaves carry it. Keeping the plant evergreen over the winter months using low levels of fertiliser will keep the mature leaves on the plant. This will help to overcome the problem of late leafing in lower chilling areas although not all low chill varieties will consistently evergreen as they mature.

WATER

An adequate supply of water cannot always be assumed these days with restrictions on the issuing of new water licences in some states. A professional assessment of the availability of water, the quality of water and the design of an efficient means of applying the water to the plants is essential to the building of a firm foundation to the plantation.

Blueberries don't like to be dry although they don't like water pooling at the roots hence the need for a well-drained mound for planting on. Ensure the plants are being watered thoroughly several times a week while they are growing and fruiting. In between harvests the plants will not need to be watered as much as will need to be assessed on a plant by plant basis. This will be dependent on rainfall and soil conditions.

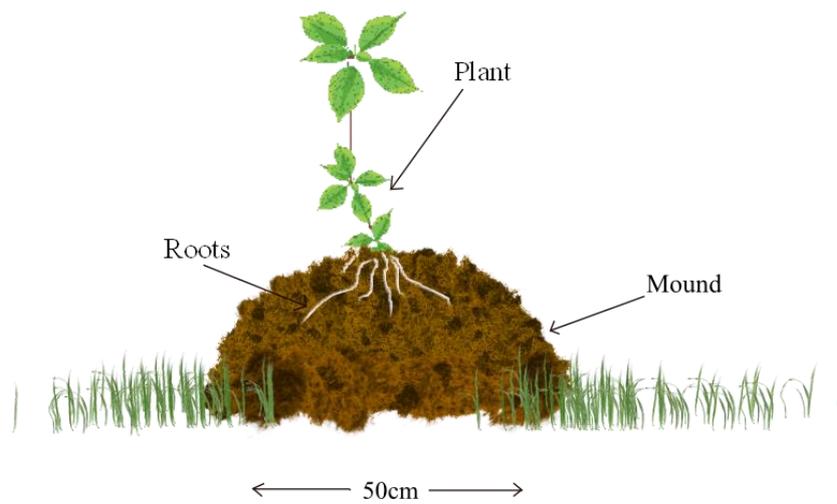


PLANTING

Planting can be done in the ground or left in pots or containers.

Planting in the Ground:

Planting Diagram



Blueberries are a shallow rooted plant so when planting in the ground be sure to stand the bush level to the way it was potted. Avoid low lying areas where water may pool. Create a mound and dig a hole for the plant to sit on top of; this allows for proper draining. Ensure the roots are free and not curled around the crown.

Growing Blueberries in Pots and Other Containers:

If the soil type in your area is not suitable for blueberries or your growing space is limited to a deck or patio, container growing is an option. This also allows plants to be easily moved around for better coverage of the sun. As well as the pots that the blueberries have been purchased in several other containers can be used. Keep in mind that you will need to increase the pot or container size as the plant grows.



Southern Highbush & Rabbiteye varieties lend themselves to this use. Misty and Biloxi are two varieties well suited to container gardening.

MULCH

Mulching is important to control weeds and retain the soil moisture.

Mulch recommended for blueberries:

- Pine Bark/Needles
- Oak Leaves
- Straw



FERTILISER

Fertilising maintains moisture and nutrients in the soil helping the plant to flourish.

Compost or animal manure should be added to mulch in small doses several times throughout the season. Do not use chicken manure as it favours bacteria and will up to pH level of the soil due to its acidic content. Be sure not to over fertilise. Any Azalea fertiliser will be suitable for blueberries such as Rose Feed.

PRUNING

In the first year it is important to prune any weak growth and to remove the flowers allowing all the plant's energy to be put into developing a strong healthy bush. Once the plant has established itself after approximately one year, continue to prune keeping only the strong and vigorous canes and laterals.



Before Pruning



After Pruning

HARVEST

Once the bush is showing signs of vitality, you can allow the plant to produce berries. The average mature bush is 4 to 5 years old and produces around 3kg of berries per season. The berries grow in clusters and take around 2 to 3 months from flowering to develop.

Each berry ripens in its own time over a 5 to 6 week period. Once they turn blue they will begin to gain flavour and size. Berries do not ripen once picked so when picking ensure the entire berry is blue (from right at the base to the front), plump and firm and only pick the largest berries in each cluster. This will give the rest of the fruit in the cluster the plant's full energy to grow to picking size. Remember that once the fruit begins to grow the plants will need to be protected from the birds by netting.



The fruit that is ready for picking should not require too much force to be removed from the plant. Be gentle with packing and do not store too many berries on top of each other to avoid squashing them. Both frozen and fresh berries should only be rinsed just before consumption. Once picked, fresh blueberries will last refrigerated for up to two weeks. Frozen blueberries can last up to one year in the freezer.

Frozen blueberries work great for baking while fresh berries can be added to salads, cereal and many savoury meals or just simply as a healthy snack by itself!



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