

PLANTING GUIDE FOR BLUEBERRY PLANTS IN MISSISSIPPI

Johnson Blueberry Farm

This is based on our experiences here at the farm and info. given out by Horticulturists.

- Varieties:** There are many varieties out there we know nothing about but these are our favorites.
The term "Rabbit eye" blueberry refers to the type of blueberry plant that is native to the south, of which there are many varieties of cultivars developed by horticulturists.

Later blooming-- Tifblue, Britewell.
Earlier blooming-- Premiere, Climax.

It is best to plant more than one variety in order to get cross pollination which gives you better results.

It is important to plant both early blooming and late blooming varieties for 2 reasons: You will have a longer season plus if there is a late frost that kills flowers, it will only affect the early blooming varieties.
- When to plant:** Approximately from October to March but fall planting is recommended because they will have all winter to put down roots and do better during that first hot dry summer.
- Where to get plants:** Go to a local store that buys certified plants that are meant to be planted in Mississippi. The plants that are offered in large "chain stores" could be a problem. Most plants offered are in 1-gallon pots but sometimes older, larger plants are available (for more money). You will be ahead of the game with the larger one, but buying the younger plant will be just as good.
Look the plant over well and look for several shoots, no dead limbs, not spindly looking, and feel the root ball to make sure it feels moist.
- Planting location:** Blueberry plants don't like any shade. The plants around the edge of our field wind up "leaning out" into the field.
Blueberries **require** soil that has a pH of approx. 5.5-6.5.,

Get a soil test kit OR send a soil sample to MSU via county agent. If the pH is low add the recommended amount of lime to correct it. If it is too high add a little sulfur. Make sure to retest every few years.
- Spacing:** You probably want to space them about 6' - 7' feet apart.
- Digging the hole:** There is an old saying about planting fruit trees: "Dig a \$50 hole for a \$5 plant". In other words, dig a pretty big hole.
Make it about twice as wide and deep as the root ball.
Chop up the soil well and mix in at least 2-3 gallons of peat moss.
Put enough of this mixture in the hole so that the root ball will be even with the ground surface.
Remove the plastic pot and gently loosen the roots/rootlets around the perimeter so they are perpendicular so they will not grow in a circle.

Place in the center of the hole and add the soil mixture and pat down. Water well. Cover the soil around the plant with whatever mulch you like and add to as needed and keep weeded. I have read that the mulch should be kept back from the trunk of the plant but I don't know if that is important or not.

7. What do I do to maintain the plant?

As soon as the plant is in the ground do the following:
Nip off the ends of the top branches and the longer horizontal branches. This is to prevent the plant from growing tall and spindly plus making it grow out the sides.
Cut out some of the inner branches to keep the plant more open to sunlight plus make it easier to get to the inside berries.
You will continue to do this yearly to maintain that openness.
It is a good idea to keep the plants about chest height for convenience.
IF not topped back they will grow many feet high!!!!!!

8. Watering: Blueberries need to be watered on a regular basis BUT do not over water. This can cause "root rot" which will kill the plant. A good plan would be to water well on Monday then again several days later. If the weather is extremely hot and dry water more often.

9. Diseases: Blueberries tend to get diseases (commercial blueberries are sprayed more than any other fruit!!!!!!). We sprayed our orchard with organic treatments that were very expensive BUT if you just have just a few plants chances are that you won't have much of a problem. Don't let the plants get stressed by keeping them properly watered, adequate sunlight, start with certified plants, dip your pruning shears in something like Clorox solution between plants, don't bump into them with the mower or weed eater, use clean mulch, etc., etc.

10. Fertilization: It is recommended that you use NO fertilizer the 1st year because it can damage the young roots BUT, IF the leaves look yellowish then you can use a small amount of "azalea" fertilizer. After the 1st year sprinkle a small amount of this fertilizer over an area about 2 feet from the plant in February and again after harvest. Never put manure around blueberry plants because it is alkaline and will probably kill the plant.

11. When should I prune every year?

You should begin pruning as soon as the berries have been picked and no later than about August 1st. If you prune after this date you are cutting off next year's crop!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

12. What do I do about birds?: Buy enough "bird netting" so you can wrap the whole plant and anchor the net to the ground.

13. What else? Go on-line and watch videos of how to grow "southern rabbit eye blueberries" and you should find out everything you need to know.

A friend once asked what he should be doing to his old blueberry plants. I asked if he got plenty of good berries and was he happy with the plants. He said "yes". I asked "what have you been doing?" He said "nothing". I said "keep doing it"