



# Blueberries in Abundance

presented by UCCE Master Gardener Volunteer  
Jeff Jenks

## ***Key ideas***

- *Blueberries can be grown successfully in Santa Clara County. Choose varieties based on your climate, space and taste.*
- *Success in growing berries depends upon good site selection and cultural practices, including, irrigation, soil management, and pruning.*
- *Blueberry plants are long lived and also have ornamental qualities.*

## **1. Why plant blueberries?**

- Highly nutritious, easy to harvest and process
- Highly perishable: eat at their freshest
- Extended fruit harvest season using relatively small spaces

## **2. General information**

- Bushes live up to 60 years
- Very ornamental bushes with white to pink blossoms, excellent fall color in leaves and twigs
- Most varieties deciduous, some evergreen
- For best production, require full sun, but not intense heat
- Roots are shallow and fibrous, like azaleas
- Are generally self-pollinating, but produce better if two varieties can cross pollinate
- Berries produced on year-old wood.

## **3. Soil requirements**

- Water retentive, well drained acidic soils; pH 4.5-5.5. Raised beds or mounds are preferred.
- For typical Santa Clara valley clay soils: Mix soil 50-50 with acidic organic matter such as peat moss, or use compost in place of some of the peat and add soil sulfur (1-2 cups per bush).
- If possible, prepare soil several months before planting.
- Containers: use high grade potting soil for acid-loving plants, or amend regular potting soil with soil sulfur. Start in 18" pot, in two years, move to 24" pot or half-barrel.

## **4. Planting**

- Planting time: late fall through early spring
- Space plants 3-6 feet apart.
- Plant high: 1-2 inches higher than in nursery container.
  - Mound soil up along sides of exposed roots.
  - Water in well; do not fertilize at planting time.
  - Mulch deeply with shredded leaves, compost, wood chips, etc. and maintain this mulch layer throughout the life of the planting. Pull the mulch away from the plants to the drip line during the rainy season.
- If planting bare root, strip off any blossoms that are on the plant at planting time or that appear the first spring. This will allow the roots to get well established in the first year.

- If branches are long and thin, tip back by 1/3.

## 5. Pruning

- No pruning in first 2-3 years, except to remove damaged branches.
- Starting in year 3 or 4, prune when dormant as follows:
  - Remove any dead, damaged or diseased wood.
  - Remove any basal shoots that are thinner than a pencil or shoots that are crowding the center of the bush.
  - Remove older canes to keep a maximum of 6-8 canes on a fully-grown bush.
  - Remove twiggy growth from high in the bush, as this will produce only small, low quality berries.

## 6. Fertilizing

- Only use fertilizers with ammoniacal nitrogen (not nitrate). Use fertilizers for acid loving plants. Apply one month after planting. Second year on: apply in early spring and again after harvest.
- Synthetic fertilizers: first application one month after growth starts. Thereafter, follow directions on the container. Ammonium sulfate is a good choice and its decomposition acidifies the soil. ¼ cup every other month starting in February, ending in June. A synthetic fertilizer with Iron is a plus.
- Always water very well after fertilizing or adding sulfur. Do not attempt to incorporate the fertilizer into the soil, as this will disturb the roots.
- To maintain low soil pH, soil sulfur should be reapplied as needed at the beginning of the rainy season. Work the sulfur gently into the soil. Consider top dressing with peat moss.

## 7. Watering

- Blueberries require constant moisture throughout the root zone, particularly during fruit bud development and when fruit is ripening
- Use mini-sprinklers or a coil of drip tubing (for example soaker hose) to be sure the entire root zone is moist.
- Do not water so much that soil remains constantly saturated.
- Maintain thick mulch over roots, using 2-4 inches of straw, dried grass clippings, shredded leaves, unsifted compost, or similar material. Pull back away from bushes during rainy season to discourage fungus and bacteria.

## 8. Varieties: choose early, mid, or late season varieties to extend harvest

- Southern highbush (*Vaccinium corymbosum* x *Vaccinium darrowii* or other species): evergreen or partially evergreen hybrid, chill hours 350 or less, more tolerant of heat, high pH.
  - Varieties: Sharpblue (early), Misty (early), Southmoon (early), O'Neal (early), Sunshine Blue, Jubilee, Emerald, Jewel
- Northern highbush (*Vaccinium corymbosum*): deciduous shrub, chill hours 400-800. These varieties will struggle in Santa Clara County due to a lack of chill hours.
  - Varieties: Bluecrop (mid), Earliblue (early), Berkeley (mid-late).
- Rabbiteye (*Vaccinium ashei*) from Southeast U.S. are **NOT** well suited to Santa Clara County climate or soils.
- Lowbush blueberries (*Vaccinium angustifolium*) from Maine, Canada are **NOT** well suited to Santa Clara County.
- Beware Costco sales of blueberry plants that come from northern climates like Michigan, Canada. They won't do well in Santa Clara County not enough chill hours.

- For containers: choose smaller varieties, such as Bountiful Blue (150-200 chill hours), Bushel and Berry™ Peach Sorbet (dwarf), Sunshine Blue. Again check the chill hours less than 500 is best.

## 9. Pests and Diseases

- Phytophthora root rot: fungal disease
  - Avoid overwatering.
- Birds
  - Protect bushes with netting once fruit has set.

## References

<http://cagardenweb.ucanr.edu/Berries/>

<http://mastergardeners.org/help/fruits>

*California Master Gardener Handbook*, University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources Publication 3382  
Growing Blueberries in the Sacramento Region: <http://ucce.ucdavis.edu/files/filelibrary/5842/25993.pdf>

University of California prohibits discrimination or harassment of any person in any of its programs and activities.  
(Complete discrimination policy statement can be found at [danr.ucop.edu/aa/danr\\_nondiscrimination\\_and\\_affir.htm](http://danr.ucop.edu/aa/danr_nondiscrimination_and_affir.htm))

Direct inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies to the Affirmative Action Director, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources, 1111 Franklin Street, 6th Floor, Oakland, CA 94607, (510) 987-0096