

COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: If you want to plant fruit in your gardens, blueberries are just right

Campbell Vaughn Columnist

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I get asked a good bit about what fruit plants are good to grow in our area. The assumption is what kind of fruits can I grow in my yard without a whole lot of trouble.

Peaches are a nightmare to get much production because of the endless supply of insects and disease that will keep you spraying once a week for about four months. And the amount of pruning you must do to keep fruit at a manageable height isn't much fun either.

A lot of other fruits need way more chill hours per year than our milder climate can provide. So, the No. 1 fruit I tell folks to plant that works best in our area is blueberries.

Why blueberries?

They are easy to grow, like our climate, are nutritious, and have few pest problems. A bonus is that they are attractive enough to grow as landscape plants.

In our area, we grow two types of blueberries - rabbiteye and southern highbush. Rabbiteyes are native to the South and are so named because the berries turn pink before they go blue, like the eye color of a white rabbit.

Rabbiteyes need cross-pollination to set fruit, which means you will need to plant more than one variety in order to produce fruit. Rabbiteye blueberries have their own special pollinators, the Southeastern blueberry bee which do a much better job of pollinating blueberries than honeybees.

Southern highbush blueberries are hybrids derived from crosses between Northern highbush blueberries and native southern species. In addition to lower chilling requirements, southern highbush cultivars can tolerate higher summer temperatures, have greater drought tolerance, and ripen earlier than rabbiteye varieties. Unlike rabbiteyes, you do not need to plant more

than one variety for pollination to occur, but planting other varieties can result in larger fruit.

The following rabbiteye cultivars are recommended in our area:

Early season

- Brightwell
- Climax
- Premier
- Woodard

Midseason

- Bluebelle
- Briteblue
- Chaucer
- Powderblue
- Tifblue

Late season

- Baldwin
- Centurion
- Choice
- Delite

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The University of Georgia has developed some new varieties that show promise. These are Alapaha, Vernon, and Ochlocknee.

The following Southern highbush blueberries are recommended for the garden and landscape:

Early season

O'Neal
Cape Fear
Suziblue

Midseason

Blue Ridge
Summit
Georgia Gem

Late season

Ozarkblue

Blueberries have specific soil requirements. They need to be grown in an acidic soil with a pH of 4.5 to 5.5, and they love organic matter. You need to do a soil test before planting, because it is a lot easier to amend the soil beforehand.

Peat moss or composted pine bark are suggested soil amendments because of their acidic nature. I prefer peat moss because it adds more organic matter, however, it is more expensive and harder to come by.

Sulfur can be used to lower pH and your soil test will advise how much to use. If you do have to use sulfur, you cannot plant until your pH has dropped which may take several months.

Plant blueberries in well-drained soil in full sun (8 to 10 hours) per day. Containerized plants are easiest to plant. Two-year-old plants are recommended.

Space southern highbush 4 to 5 feet in the row and 8 to 10 feet between rows. Rabbiteye should be planted 6 feet apart in the row and 10 to 12 feet between rows. Dig the holes twice as wide as the plant and no deeper than container is tall. They are shallow rooted plants and planting too deeply is detrimental to their survival.

Mix the native soil with the peat moss or composted pine bark and place around the plant. Soak thoroughly to settle the soil, then mulch the plants with 2 to 3 inches of shredded bark or compost.

After you have planted, remove all the shoot tips that have flower buds (these are the plump rounded ones) and low, twiggy growth. About one-third of the bush should be removed in this process. This early pruning will help with survival and vigor in the first growing season. As painful as it is, pinch off the immature fruit the first year to help in the overall plant's establishment.

Blueberries love water. Water plants once or twice per week. Because blueberry plants can retract water from berries, adequate moisture, particularly during fruit production, is essential to producing plump, juicy berries.

Blueberries set next year's buds in the late summer and early fall, a time which is often a drought period for us, so watering is necessary during this phase.

Trickle irrigation is perfect for blueberries because you can use it without running the well dry and you don't waste water. (A note of warning to you unfortunate people who have clay soils, don't overwater blueberries as they are prone to root rot.)

Wait until the first leaves have reached full size before fertilizing. Apply 1 tablespoon of an acid-forming fertilizer such as azalea/camellia fertilizer in a circle about 12 inches from the plant. Repeat at six-week intervals until mid-August.

Now is a perfect time to plant blueberries, and you will reap the rewards for years to come.