

Blueberries

Blueberries require acid soil with high organic matter content. Good drainage is essential as blueberries' shallow fibrous roots are easily starved for oxygen. However, blueberries are not tolerant of drought conditions and need to be kept moist. They will produce best in a sunny location.

Three types of blueberries can be grown in Iowa (or Vermont); Highbush, Half-high and Lowbush. Plant multiple cultivars (cultivated varieties) within 5 feet of each other. Even though blueberry cultivars are self fertile, cross-pollination produces larger berries. Cultivars ripen at different times so you can lengthen the harvest season by planting a selection.

Highbush blueberries are hardy in central and southern Iowa. The shrubs are 6-8 feet tall at maturity. Suggested varieties for Iowa include 'Blueray', 'Bluecrop', 'Patriot', 'Jersey', 'Rubel', and 'Elliot'.

Half-high blueberries possess greater cold hardiness and are the best choice for gardeners in northern Iowa. Plants are relatively small and usually reach 2 to 3 feet in height. They produce small to medium sized berries. Suggested varieties are 'Northblue', 'Northcountry', 'Northsky', 'Polaris', and 'St. Cloud'.

Lowbush blueberries make good groundcovers that grow 2-4 inches high. 'Cumberland' is a good lowbush cultivar.

Spring is the best time to plant blueberries. The roots of dormant, bare-root plants should be soaked in water for about an hour before planting. After planting, prune back the plant by half, removing the small side branches and heading back the main branches. Blueberry plants should not be allowed to bear fruit the first two years after planting. Blueberry plants should come into full production by the fifth or sixth year. Mulch your berries with woodchips to a depth of 2-3 inches. Increase the depth of the mulch to 6 inches over a period of years. If the blueberries are mulched initially, this practice will need to be continued since the plant roots grow primarily in the interface between the soil surface and the mulch. Add mulch every two or three years keeping the depth at 6 inches. Also avoid mulch materials such as leaves, or layers of newspaper that can mat down and deprive the roots of needed oxygen.

Check your blueberries frequently for water the first few years since their shallow roots are not particularly good at taking water from the soil. High soil organic matter content will greatly contribute to your success in growing blueberries and also enable the plants to tolerate pH ranges from 3.8 up to 5.5. In Iowa, blueberries have few insect or disease problems. Birds are the biggest threat to the crop of berries. Use netting placed over the bushes when the fruits begin to change color. Anchor or bury the net in the ground to prevent bird entry at ground level. After the third year prune blueberry plants every winter. The best time to prune blueberries is January to early March when the plants are dormant. The best berries are produced on 1-year-old wood that is from 8-12 inches in length. The main objectives of pruning are to promote the growth of strong, new wood and to maintain good fruit production.

Sources used include Iowa State University\ University Extension presentation notes and their pamphlet Growing Blueberries in Iowa, ATTRA publication Organic Production of Blueberries, and The Backyard Berry Book by Stella Otto.

Text compiled by Melissa Sharapova