

Blueberries in the Home Garden

Submitted by Amy Arnoux, Master Gardener Intern 2018

Most of us who live in the Tidewater area don't immediately think of growing fruit as a viable project in our suburban neighborhoods. Tree fruits such as apples or pears are messy and don't fit well in a modest backyard. Picking up fallen fruit so you can mow the yard is a chore, and the rotting fruit attracts insects which many people find objectionable. But consider growing a couple blueberry bushes. They are relatively compact and don't require extensive maintenance to stay healthy and productive. Blueberries are a 'super food', providing antioxidants and a good source of fiber. Grocery store blueberries are expensive and lack the quality and freshness of home-grown produce.

According to the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE), three types of blueberries grow best in our Tidewater home gardens: rabbiteye, southern highbush, and northern highbush. Within these types there are multiple varieties, so locating suitable blueberries bushes at a nursery should be relatively easy. Consult the VCE publication ['Small Fruit in the Home Garden'](#)¹ to identify the specific varieties which are too numerous to list here. Blueberry production will be limited in the first couple growing seasons, but by the third year you will have a good harvest, and happy bushes can live from 20 to 30 years.

Here are some growing tips to keep in mind when planting blueberries in your yard.

- Blueberries require a sunny location.
- For good fruit production you will need two different cultivars that bloom at the same time to cross-pollinate.
- Typically blueberries will give good returns under average garden soil with adequate nutrition. Blueberries prefer a lower (acidic) soil pH around 5.0. Use peat moss, pine needles or sulfur worked into the soil to lower the soil pH if needed.
- Blueberries require moisture but don't like wet feet – plant them in a well-drained area that does not remain soggy after a rain.
- Mulching the plants is recommended as a soil management practice, and fertilization is not needed during planting or the first year of growth.
- Pruning is not usually necessary (except for dead branches) in the first three years. Afterwards, prune between leaf fall and bud set (fall to late winter) to maintain 10 - 15 healthy canes.
- Birds will be your biggest pest. Use bird netting or make cages to protect the berries. Some people also use shiny pie tins or Christmas tree tinsel tied to the bushes to scare away birds.

As a note, I have successfully grown blueberries without strictly following each bulleted recommendation above. My soil pH is a little higher than recommended, but I am getting good yields in

¹ Samtani, Jayesh B., Rafie, Reza, and Wolf, Tony K. 'Small Fruit in the Home Garden.' Publication 426-840. Virginia Cooperative Extension.

June and July. More information about growing home garden blueberries is available at the VCE. A good publication to use is referenced above – ‘Small Fruit in the Home Garden’.

This is a picture of blueberries from my home garden. I planted two blueberry bushes. This was the first picking in the third year after planting, but keep in mind you can pick two or three times per week! Subsequent harvests that summer got larger.

