



Farm Notes₃

Rabbiteye Blueberries

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Why Plant Rabbiteyes

Rabbiteye blueberries, *Vaccinium virgatum*, are a popular option for north Florida blueberry growers because they normally bloom after the threat of frost. This popular fruit can be grown in a relatively small space without much trouble. The rabbiteye blueberries are a sustainable crop that requires few, if any, pesticides.

Organic production requires use of Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) approved fertilizer, amendments and pesticides. See: <https://www.omri.org/> for more info.

Getting Started: Choose an Appropriate Site

Rabbiteye blueberries require a well drained, acidic soil with an ideal pH of 4.5. They should be grown in full sun and avoid low lying wet locations.

Get the soil tested to determine the soil pH and soil fertility. Sample bags can be obtained from your local extension office or refer to this website for soil sampling

instructions:

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ss494>

Orchard Layout

It is preferable to plant a mixture of early, mid and late season varieties to broaden the harvest time. Plant each cultivar in a 3 to 5 foot wide in-row strip. Plant spacing is 5 feet within the row and 13 to 15 feet between rows for mowing and maintenance.

Installation and Soil Preparation

Use mined, elemental sulfur to lower pH organically. Use a granular formulation if available to minimize exposure to sulfur dust. Till in at a rate of 300 lbs per acre to lower the pH approximately 1 point in Northeast FL.

Be sure to check the pH a month after applying the sulfur to see if the desired pH has been reached. It is best to make adjustments to soil pH slowly because the amount of sulfur needed to lower the pH differs between soils.

A twenty foot long 5 foot wide row

would require 0.7 lbs of sulfur at the 300/lbs per acre rate.

The pH only needs to be adjusted within the blueberry row, not the mowed row middles.

Additional soil acidification can be accomplished by adding a 4 inch layer of pine bark on top of the blueberry row. Leaving the bark on top will help suppress weeds organically. Non-organic growers may choose to till the bark into the soil and suppress weeds with herbicides.

Suggested Varieties*

Early bearing varieties:

Austin*
Climax*
Savory*

Mid to late season varieties:

Brightwell*
Powderblue*
Premier

New varieties

Ira
Yadkin (NS State)
Ochlocknee
Titan* (UGA* very large fruit)

(* preferred options if available)

Planting & Establishment

The best time to plant blueberries is from mid-December to mid-February. Use plants that are about 2 feet tall with well-developed root systems that are not pot-bound.

Set the plants at the same height as when they were growing in the pot.

Weed control is extremely important because blueberries are shallow-rooted plants that compete poorly with weeds.

Blueberries may be lightly pruned at the time of planting. Select the tallest, strongest canes and leave it unpruned. Remove the weak, "twiggy" growth at the base of the plant. If the plant has a large top compared to the root system remove about one-third of the top by selectively pruning the least vigorous growth and cutting back the tops of vigorous canes by several inches.

Remove all berries the first year and do not allow too much fruit for the second year. By the third year the plants should be big enough to support a decent crop.

Fertilizer

Fertilize with ammonium sulfate, about 2 ounces per plant every 6 weeks (starting 15 March) the first year. Use 10-10-10 every third application instead of ammonium sul-

fate (may use 10-0-10) if the soil has sufficient phosphorus.

You can also use a blueberry special fertilizer that is usually available at farm supply stores. Azalea or Rhododendron fertilizer will also work. Mature plants should be fertilized with 6 ounces of ammonium sulfate every 6 weeks from March 15 until August. As before, substitute 10-10-10 or 10-0-10 every third fertilizer application. Spread the fertilizer evenly over a circle 2 feet in diameter around the plant.

Watering

Most of the 40 inches of water needed annually is supplied by rain. The most critical period for irrigation is the establishment year, especially from early fruit set until the end of harvest. Mature plants need about 0.6 inches of water per week. About 1.2 inches of water per week is needed throughout the late spring and summer months. Do not over water your blueberry plants. Irrigation water from wells often has a pH of 6.5 or higher and can increase the pH of soils rapidly. We recommend having the pH of your well water tested.

Pruning

Unpruned blueberry plants become dense, twiggy, and nonproductive. Pruning is recommended to remove unproductive canes and to reduce the height of the canopy.

Rabbiteye blueberries can be pruned too often. The objective is to get the plant up to size as soon as possible. Mature rabbiteye blueberry bushes can reach a height of 20 feet.

New canes tend to be more productive than older canes. A general rule for plants over four years old is to remove about 1/5–1/4 of the oldest canes each year (usually 1–3 of the oldest canes). After 6 to 10 years, rabbiteye blueberry bushes can be limited to a height of 5 to 7 feet by pruning.

Pests and Diseases

Bird damage is especially prevalent on early ripening blueberries. Netting can be an effective barrier.

The Spotted Wing Drosophila fruit fly is a new insect pest on berry crops in North Florida. It lays its eggs in side the fruit. The fly should be monitored by using traps. It's arrival may prevent blueberries from being grown organically because organic approved insecticides are not effective controls.

Additional Resources

Blueberry Gardeners Guide
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/edfiles/MG/MG35900.pdf>

Spotted Wing Drosophila in Florida Berry Culture
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/in839>