

# BLUEBERRIES—PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE



**Illinois Extension**  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN



Simple, healthy, and delicious, blueberries are native to North America and enjoyed around the world. They are produced by domestic and international farmers and home gardeners who have a passion for growing the most delicious and high-quality blueberries. There are many varieties of blueberries. All year round, wherever you are, you can make any day better with a boost of blue.

## **Planting and Growing Container Blueberries**

Blueberry varieties bred for containers are a convenient update to the six-foot highbush blueberry bush. The new varieties can be grown in pots or used in the landscape. Containers and smaller spaces make it easier to control the pH (between 4.5 and 5.5) and provide well drained soil. Blueberries also require hours of cool time (less than 45 degrees and greater than 32 degrees) for the release of hormones and proper flower development. The amount of cool time varies with the variety of blueberry.

Jelly Bean® Blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum* 'ZF06-179' PP #24,662) is a newer variety of blueberry. Jelly Bean® has large, flavorful blueberries that taste like sweet homemade blueberry jelly. The foliage has unique, elongated green leaves with highlights of red in cooler climates. The Jelly Bean® Blueberry is ideal for a mini-hedge along a pathway, in the landscape, or in decorative patio containers. At maturity, the plant is 1 to 2 feet tall and wide. They are moderate growers. The flowers bloom in spring with midsummer fruit. They are deciduous and suited for USDA Zone 4-8. They thrive in full and partial sun and need to be watered weekly or more often in extreme heat and in containers.

Other varieties of dwarf blueberries include Top Hat, Northblue, Sunshine Blue, Northcountry, and Peach Sorbet.

## **How to Grow Blueberries in Pots**

If you've grown other fruit-bearing plants, you know you're in it for the long haul. Your plants can happily produce fruit for years with relatively little care, but you'll want to start them off right. For blueberry plants, that means opting for the largest pot possible, and planting one plant per pot. Choose a container that's at least 18 inches deep and boasts ample drainage holes. For even better drainage, place pots on top of bricks. Wooden half-barrels and other deep, wide, weatherproof containers work well for keeping blueberry plants in for the long term.

## **Harvesting Blueberries in Containers**

It's most likely you won't have to harvest blueberries within the first year of planting blueberries in your containers. You should expect to be able to harvest a full crop of potted blueberries in five years. Pick them between June and August, but they should be easy to harvest as they fall off the bush and right into your hand. Consider netting the container to keep the birds from eating your berries.

(continued on page 2)

## **Written by:**

Carol Longley

Illinois Extension Master Gardener  
uiemg-rockisland@illinois.edu



*University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.*

## References:

Retrieved from About Blueberries - Blueberry.org, <https://blueberry.org/about-blueberries/>, January 27, 2022.  
Retrieved from How to Grow & Care for Blueberries in Containers (thespruce.com), <https://www.thespruce.com/growing-blueberries-in-containers-848170#>, January 27, 2022



## Pruning

Blueberry bushes can grow large, but they won't need pruning until their fourth year in the pot. The pruning will stimulate more growth. Prune the bushes before it begins its new growth phase. Use sterilized, sharp garden tools to cut dead, weak, low-growing, and unruly branches in the late winter or early spring. Pruning thins out the old growth, allowing light into the middle of the bush.

## Over-wintering

Once your growing season is over, you'll want to protect your blueberry plants for the winter season. Blueberries are tough plants, but if you live in a cold-winter climate you should move your containers against the side of your home or into a protected area to keep them out of the wind. You can also mulch your plants with straw or wrap them in burlap. In the winter while the plants are dormant, they don't need much water, but you shouldn't let them dry out completely.

## Common Pests and Plant Diseases.

Insect and fungal problems can sometimes occur on blueberry plants. If you need to treat your plants, make sure to use a fungicide or pesticide that is safe for edible plants. Blueberry maggots and cherry fruit worms can also be occasional problems. While these pests are treatable with systemic pesticides, be wary of their use, as many are toxic to pollinating insects. If yellowing of the leaves occurs, it's probably a sign that the soil pH is too high and is causing chlorosis. To rectify the issue, acidify the soil with fertilizer made for acid-loving plants.

## Planting & Growing Highbush Blueberries

Highbush blueberry bushes can grow up to 12 feet tall, but most peak at about 6 feet. In the spring, you'll see clusters of beautiful white blossoms pop up all over the bushes, which are then pollinated by bees. Each blossom eventually becomes one blueberry—first hard and green, then reddish-purple, and finally blue, sweet-tart, and ready to eat!

### Identify the Best Blueberry Plants

When you grab a boost of blue in North America, you're most often eating highbush blueberries. However, the highbush blueberry classification covers a range of different blueberry varieties, each of which is unique in its season, size, shape, color, and taste. Depending on the climate and ripening season in your area, certain varieties will grow better than others. Some tend to grow best in southern climates (like the West Coast, the Southeast, and the Southern Hemisphere), and some fare better in northern environments (Northern U.S. and Canada).

### Select Your Blueberry Spot

Once you've found the right blueberry plant, you'll also want to find a place it can thrive. Select a sunny location with well-worked, well-drained soil that is free of weeds. Avoid planting near trees, which block out sunlight and suck up the moisture in the soil. It's best to grow blueberries in an area where water is readily available so you can keep their roots moist throughout the growing season. Raised beds or patio containers are good options for areas where the soil is not ideal.

### Prep Your Soil

Soil preparation is crucial to the health of blueberry plants. Blueberries prefer acidic soil, and if the soil in your area is not acidic enough, you may need to make adjustments with guidance from your local garden center or Cooperative Extension. Planning ahead is crucial—if changes in your soil's pH levels are necessary, it's best to make them a year before you plant your blueberries.

### Space and Plant Your Blueberries

It's time to get your plants in the ground! In most areas, it's ideal to plant blueberries in the fall or spring. You can plant blueberry bushes as close as 2 or 2.5 feet apart to form solid hedgerows, or space them up to 6 feet apart so they grow individually. If you plant in rows, allow 8 to 10 feet between the rows.

## Fertilize Your Blueberry Plants

Blueberries are part of a plant family that includes the flowering azalea, mountain laurel, and heather-plants. You can ask your local garden center for fertilizer recommendations; but once established, blueberry plants typically respond well to acid fertilizers such as azalea or rhododendron formulations. Follow the instructions on the label carefully—blueberries are sensitive to overfertilization! You'll want to apply fertilizer one month after planting, not at the time of planting. For best results, fertilize your plants once in early spring and again in late spring, always watering thoroughly afterward.

## Mulch Your Blueberry Plants

Blueberries do best with 2-4 inches of mulch over the roots to conserve moisture, prevent weeds, and add organic matter. Bark mulch, acid compost, sawdust, and grass clippings all work well.

## Supporting Your Blueberry Growth

After establishing your blueberry plants in the first year, continue fertilizing twice each year, once in early spring and again in late spring, following the guidance from your local garden center or Cooperative Extension. Always water thoroughly after fertilizing. Replenish your mulch as needed, keeping 2-4 inches of mulch over the roots to conserve moisture, prevent weeds, and add organic matter. This will reduce your watering and weeding chores. For extra protection, drape bird netting over your plants. You're not the only one who enjoys blueberries—they're a favorite snack for hungry birds.

## Pruning Your Blueberry Bushes

We know it's hard to wait, but it's best to give your blueberry plants time to get established before you let them bear fruit. In your first year or two of growing blueberries, remove any plant blossoms before they produce berries in order to stimulate hardy new growth. You will not need to prune your blueberry bushes for the first four years or so. After that, you will need to prune plants in late winter or early spring to help stimulate growth for the following season.

## Harvest Your Blueberries

During the sweet summer months, you'll hit your jackpot. In North America, blueberries are typically ready for picking between June and August, but they may arrive sooner or a tad later depending on your region. However, being just a little patient has big rewards. Don't pick the berries immediately after they turn blue—give them a couple of days. When they're ready, blueberries should fall right into your hand for a well-earned boost of blue.



## Ginger 'n' Spice Bubbling Blueberry Pie

Prep Time: 1 hour 15 minutes

Cook Time: 1 hour 8 minutes

Portions: 8

### Ingredients

#### Crust

- 2 ½ cups all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 10 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cubed (¼-inch-thick cubes)
- ½ cup chilled all-vegetable shortening
- 3 ½ tablespoons ice water
- ½ tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 1 egg white, whisked to foamy (divided use)

#### Filling

- 4 ½ cups fresh blueberries (room temperature)
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- ¾ cup granulated sugar
- ¼ cup instant or quick-cooking tapioca-ground (You can fine grind tapioca in a coffee grinder)
- 2 tablespoons finely minced crystallized ginger
- ¾ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ⅛ scant teaspoon ground allspice
- 2 tablespoons melted butter
- 3 tablespoons orange marmalade
- ½ tablespoon raw turbinado cane sugar



### Instructions

#### Crust

1. Combine lemon juice and ice water and set aside.
2. In a medium bowl, whisk flour and salt. Cut in butter and shortening with a pastry blender until coarse meal forms. Sprinkle half the water/lemon mix over flour mixture; toss with a fork. Add remaining half, tossing until dough begins to form a ball.
3. Divide dough in half, flatten it into 1/2-inch-thick discs. Wrap each disc in plastic wrap. Chill 30 minutes.

#### Filling

1. In a large bowl toss blueberries with lemon juice.
2. In a separate medium-sized bowl, stir sugar, tapioca, ginger, cinnamon, and allspice together until combined. Gently fold into blueberries until well coated.
3. Melt butter, stir in marmalade then fold into blueberry mixture. Let set.

#### Pie Assembly

1. Heat oven to 425°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
2. On a lightly floured surface, roll one chilled dough disc into a 13-inch circle. Fit dough in a 9-inch pie plate. Trim overhang to 3/4-inch of edge. Brush egg white over bottom and sides of dough. Reserve remaining egg white. Set the lined plate in freezer.
3. Roll second chilled disc on a lightly floured surface into a 13-inch circle then cut into 1-inch-wide strips with a pastry wheel.
4. Retrieve pie plate and pour in filling, mounding slightly toward center. Weave strips of dough over filling to form a lattice top. Seal, trim, and crimp edge. Brush reserved egg white over dough. Sprinkle evenly with sugar.
5. Set pie on lined sheet. Bake 18 minutes at 425°F. Reduce heat to 375°F. Bake 50 minutes or until pie is bubbling. Cool on a wire rack. Top with vanilla ice cream.



**Illinois Extension**  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

University of Illinois Extension serving Henry, Mercer, Rock Island & Stark Counties  
Visit our website: [extension.illinois.edu/hmrs](http://extension.illinois.edu/hmrs) Call our office (309) 756-9978.

*University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.*