



Blueberries in Containers in Orange County

Blueberries belong to the family Ericaceae, which include azaleas and rhododendrons. Most gardeners will recognize this plant family as one that does best in acidic soil. Blueberries require low pH and actively decomposing soil to thrive. Follow these simple steps to harvest handfuls of super-sweet berries from a container-grown blueberry plant.

Growing blueberries in the ground can be difficult. For quick and easy results, containerize them. Dave Wilson Nursery recommends this method for growing blueberries in the home garden.

Step 1:

Soil Mix. For healthy, vigorous plants mix the following:

- 1/3 1/4" pathway bark
- 1/3 peat moss
- 1/3 forest-byproduct-based potting soil (azalea mix or acid plant mix)
- 1 handful of soil sulfur per plant

Step 2:

Plant. Choose a container size to suit the plant.

- Start all 4-inch to 1-gallon plants in 2-to-5-gallon containers.
- For established 2-to-5-gallon plants, choose a 16-to-20-inch container.
- Fill the bottom of the container with the soil mix and pack down.
- Place the blueberry and continue to fill around root with the soil mix.

Step 3:

Water & Fertilize. Don't let the container dry out.

- Never use fertilizer with nitrogen in nitrate form!! It can kill roots.
- Blueberries love full sun.
- Fertilize with an acid-based fertilizer once a month during the growing season.

Blueberries need a sunny location and do best with sandy well-drained soils that are kept moist throughout the growing season. Blueberries have shallow, fibrous roots and need adequate drainage. The balance between adequate moisture and too much water is important, as blueberries are susceptible to root rot. Peat and muck soils are suitable.

Do not fertilize at planting time. Four weeks after planting, use a 10-10-10 fertilizer that contains ammonium sulfate or a potassium sulfate. Or use organic-based fertilizers such as blood, feather, or fish meal at the rate of 1 pound per plant.

All blueberries are self-pollinating; however most do best if planted with another variety. It takes at least three years for a blueberry plant to become established and healthy. Remove all blossoms as they appear in the first 1-2 years. Prune off any diseased and damaged wood during the first dormant season. After their second year, blueberries should be pruned annually.

Blueberry plants have a naturally bushy form. Limit number of branches to the age of the plant, up to a maximum of 6 to 8 branches for old bushes. Remove 1-2 branches yearly so that no branches are more than 4-6 years old. Prune out suckers and weak wood, especially from the top of the plant.

There are three varieties of blueberries — northern highbush, southern highbush, and rabbit eye. Most nurseries make it a point to carry cultivars that have been tested and do well in each area. Blueberry cultivars are listed below in order of ripening.

- **Early Blue.** Berries medium-sized, loose clustered, light blue, firm, resistant to cracking, good, sweet flavor; vigorous, erect, productive; very susceptible to root rot.
- **Duke.** Berries medium-sized, light blue, firm, good flavor; vigorous, erect, open, productive; one of the main commercial varieties.
- **Reka.** Berries mild-flavored; rapid growing, highly productive.
- **Spartan.** Berries very large, light blue, firm, excellent flavor; vigorous, erect, open, productive.
- **Patriot.** Berries very large, slightly flat, medium blue, excellent flavor; vigorous, moderately erect, open, very productive; tolerates heavier, wetter soils.
- **Collins.** Berries large, light blue, firm, excellent flavor; medium-sized, slightly spreading, productive.
- **O'Neal.** Berries large with excellent color and flavor. Spreading bush with low chilling requirement.
- **Misty.** Berries medium large, excellent quality. Evergreen foliage, very low chilling requirement.
- **Bladen.** Berries medium sized, light blue, vigorous upright growth, low chilling requirement.
- **Blue Ray.** Berries very large, light blue, firm, excellent flavor; vigorous, erect, open, productive.
- **Chandler.** Berries extremely large, excellent flavor; moderate vigor.
- **Blue Crop.** Berries very large, light blue, firm, good flavor; vigorous, erect, open, very productive (tends to overproduce); one of the main commercial cultivars.
- **Berkeley.** Berries very large, light blue, firm, mild flavor and mild acidity; vigorous, open, spreading, very productive.
- **Nelson.** Berries very large, excellent flavor; vigorous, high yielding.
- **Darrow.** Berries medium-sized, light blue, firm, excellent flavored; vigorous, erect, consistently productive.
- **Late Blue.** Berries large, firm, good flavor; vigorous, erect, productive.
- **Elliott.** Berries medium-sized, mild flavor, tart; vigorous, erect, consistently productive.
- **Southmoon.**
- **Reveille.**

*Sources: The California Garden Web <https://ucanr.edu/sites/gardenweb/Berries/Blueberries/>,
Dave Wilson Nurseries, UC Master Gardeners of Stanislaus County*

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