

## Get Soil Ready Now to Plant Blueberries Next Year

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### *For Immediate Release*

Have fresh blueberries got you thinking about planting berries next spring? Well, the clock is ticking. You can't wait for spring. Start now.

You should begin proper site preparation at least a year before you plant blueberries, according to Dr. Mary Beth Bennett, agriculture associate professor with the Berkeley County office of the West Virginia University Extension Service.

In recognition of July as blueberry month, Bennett devoted a recent newspaper column to the healthful, tasty fruit. Here are excerpts from her column:

### **Select Right Site**

Blueberries can be grown in most parts of West Virginia with attention to a few requirements. This column will focus on growing highbush blueberries—the species commonly grown commercially.

Mature highbush plants are 6 to 8 feet tall. Several canes are produced from the crown each spring, and canes live for many years. Flower buds form in the fall, and plants produce fruit about two months after flowering in the spring.

If you plan to plant blueberries, observe the natural vegetation of the site you want. Do you see plants like wild blueberries, huckleberries, azaleas, laurel, native spiraea or hardhack growing in the area?

If you do, you have a good sign that the soil may be good for blueberries. If not, several measures need to be taken for a successful planting.

Begin site preparation at least a year prior to planting. Make your priority measures be soil tests, perennial weed control and the incorporation of organic matter in the planting strips.

Blueberries require soils high in organic matter. Therefore, well-rotted sawdust may be mixed with the soil in the planting hole. These materials are also useful as mulch around the plant to control weeds and conserve moisture. Six inches of mulch should be applied at planting and at least an inch replaced annually to the soil around the plants.

Blueberries have shallow roots and require frequent irrigation. But they do not like having wet feet; so be sure the soil is well-drained. If the soil is not well-drained, hilling the planting row a foot or so above the aisle will help keep the roots out of standing water.

### **Test the Soil**

Preparing the soil for planting is much the same as preparing for a home garden. To learn the pH and fertility of your soil, have the soil tested prior to planting by having samples analyzed by the West Virginia University Soil Testing Lab. The service is free and valuable.

Till cover crops or legume sod in late fall or early in the spring. If you add fertilizer, base your calculations on the WVU soil analysis. The fertilizer should be added and mixed with the soil in the spring when you work the soil for planting.

Blueberries grow in acidic soil in a range of pH from 4.0 to 5.2, with the optimum from 4.5 to 4.8. Soil more alkaline than that can be corrected by the addition of sulfur. If you use ferrous sulfate to increase acidity, multiply the number of pounds indicated for sulfur by 6.

### **Order Early, Prune Well**

Order plants well in advance of your planting date to ensure you get large plants. Select your highbush cultivars so that you will have a range of harvest dates and you can spread out the harvest labor. More than one cultivar is suggested to provide cross pollination, which results in larger berries.

Plant blueberries in the spring as early as possible. Plants should be set four to five feet apart with enough room between rows to allow equipment to pass.

Pruning is essential to produce large berries and vigorous plants. For the first two years, the flower buds should be pruned off the plant to allow it to become established. Fruit is produced only on growth from the previous season. The best fruit is produced on strong wood that is about pencil-thick.

Once branches get too thin to have good fruit, remove the whole cane at the soil level. Renewal shoots coming from the base of the plant should be encouraged to replace the current fruiting wood.

Usually, canes should not be kept more than five years. Try to keep an equal number of one-, two-, three-, four-, and five-year-old canes. Keep the canopy open to intercept the maximum amount of light and allow air to circulate.

If you begin now, you eventually will have a bountiful crop of blueberries. In the meantime, buy blueberries from local farmers. Visit area farmers markets, where you will find a variety of local produce in season.

For information about growing fruits and vegetables, check the WVU Extension Service website at [www.ext.wvu.edu](http://www.ext.wvu.edu).

Contact the Kanawha County office of the WVU Extension Service at (304) 720-9573 or [Kanawha.ext.wvu.edu](http://Kanawha.ext.wvu.edu) for details about local agriculture programs.

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