HOW TO GROW BLUEBERRIES ORGANICALLY

IN YOUR GARDEN

A NATURAL FARM & EDUCATIONAL CENTER

SPRING 2016

TYPES OF BLUEBERRIES & COLD REQUIREMENTS

Two types of Blueberries are grown in Florida for fruit production. The Rabbit eye varieties for North Florida and the panhandle. And the Southern Highbush varieties for Central Florida (from Gainesville to the Tampa area). This distribution is due to the fact that some varieties need more cold winter temperatures (called chill hours) than others in order to trigger their blooming. Orlando is considered 250 to 300 chill hours.

PLANTING TIME

Any time as long as your plants are in pots

SUN EXPOSURE

Full sun is preferable

COLD TOLERANCE / PROTECTION

When blooms are present, cover the plants with blankets if risk of freeze or frost

PLANTING LOCATION

It is important to not plant your blueberry plants where you have had flooding during previous heavy summer rains. Blueberry plants will not tolerate to have their “feet” in standing water for a day or more and will develop root diseases.

PLANTING DEPTH

Plant your plants so that the soil level even up with the pot soil level. Planting deeper will make your plant weak and prone to disease. Planting too shallow could cause your plants to dry up.

SOIL TYPE

Blueberry plants are similar to Azalea, Rhododendrons and Pineapples, they require an acidic soil (pH 4.5 to 5) in order to thrive. It is not necessary to analyze your soil because it is very likely that it will not be acidic enough. Therefore, whether you plant in a planter or in a raised bed, it is recommended to plant your plants in a mix made of 90% fine aged pine bark chips and 10% organic compost or 90% peat moss and 10% compost.

PLANTING IN POTS OR IN THE GARDEN SOIL ?

Because of the previous point regarding the soil type required by the blueberries, we recommend 2 ways of growing your plants.

The first one is to grow your plants in raised beds. Create a “sand box” with 2”x8” boards (ideally cedar or cypress wood), take your plants out of their plastic pots and place them inside your empty sand box every 2.5 feet. Fill up all around your plants with the soil you chose (previous point). This technique is very easy, does not require any digging and also allows your soil to stay inside the raised bed during heavy rains.

The second method is to plant your blueberry plants in bigger pots/planters. This technique has the advantage to allow you to take your plants with you if you have to move. One of its drawbacks is the challenge to keep your soil moist at all times. A raised bed with mulch will have more autonomy.

MULCHING

It is recommended to mulch around your blueberry plants (and all your other plants as a matter of fact) in order to protect your soil moisture against evaporation. It will also allow you to prevent weeds from growing around your plants.

You can use pine needles, large pieces of pine bark, live oak leaves or any other local material accessible to you. A matt of 2 to 4” is appropriate.

WATERING

Unless you receive a rainfall of about 1 inch or more, water once a day for about 30 minutes if you use a drip irrigation system or 15 minutes per day if you use a Maxijet irrigation system.

BLOOMING TIME

In Central Florida your plants will mostly bloom from mid-February to mid-March

FRUITS MATURITY

In Central Florida you will pick from mid-April to the end of May

FERTILIZATION

We fertilize our plants 3 times a year. In February, June and September. The fertilizer we currently use is a slow release fertilizer made out of composted poultry manure with a ratio of 6 – 2 – 8 + calcium and Mycorrhizal fungi. Each plant will receive 2 cups of that fertilizer at each application.

INSECTS & DISEASES

The 2 main insect issues we have experienced are the Japanese Beetles and tiny caterpillars. The Japanese Beetles do not affect the health of the plants. They mostly chew the outside of the leaves and create little notches. The caterpillars will come in big populations and can destroy whole plants in a day or so. Your best defense is to scout your plants every day or every other day, watch for signs of attack and hand pick the caterpillars to stop their propagation.

As far as diseases are concerned, 2 main issues can occur. Root rotting and branch rotting. To prevent the root rotting it is advised to not plant your plants in areas prone to flooding. To prevent the branch rotting it is recommended to disinfect your plants after summer pruning (we currently use a mix of hydrogen dioxide and water at a ratio of 1 to 100). It is recommended to spray your plants in the evening when the sun is down and the temperatures have decreased.

PRUNING

The purpose of pruning your plants is to keep them at a size allowing you to pick their fruits easily and mostly to make your plants fuller and more productive the following year.

Once the fruits are picked (around mid-May), trim all the branches down to 1.5 to 2’ tall. 6 weeks later, new branches should be about 12” long and you should pinch 2” off of all those new branches. You can repeat that pinching method until early September in order to have very branchy and full plants coming into the winter.

POLLINATION and CROSS-POLLINATION

Blueberry plants have both male and female flowers on the same plants but it is important to plant more than 1 variety of blueberries in your garden in order to get more fruits thanks to cross-pollination.

Bees and wasps will pollinate your plants and it is recommended to attract and protect bees in your garden. You can do that by always having plants in bloom at all times of the year.

VARIETIES

All the varieties we grow have been developed at the University of Florida and are well suited for the Central Florida / Ocala to Tampa area.

Mature plant height is 5’ to 6’ but plants can be kept shorter by pruning several times during the year.

**Emerald Gulfcoast**

One of the most popular varieties Perfect variety for Tampa area

for Central Florida with vigorous growth but also Orlando area

and high quality fruit. Early-mid season,

Mid-season, needs only 150 to 250 chill hrs 100 to 200 chill hrs

**Farthing Scintilla**

Big fruits up to a quarter-coin size Very big and firm fruits

Early season, 100 to 300 chill hours Early season, 200 chill hrs

**Sweetcrisp Springhigh**

Very sweet and crisp fruits Very big fruits

Early-mid season, 200 to 300 chill hours Early season, 200 chill hrs

Sets fruits even with poor

Pollination