

GROWING NATIVE BLUEBERRIES

Blueberries are one of the few crops native to the continental United States.

by Paul Lyrene

When I was a kid, my mother dug three wild blueberry plants from the piney woods near Pensacola and put them in her garden. They all died in less than a year, which surprised me, since she is a good gardener. For the past five years I've had the good fortune of working on blueberries at the University of Florida, and I think I've learned some things that might help you avoid my mother's unhappy experience with native blueberries.

First, I should say there are seven reasonably-distinguishable species of true blueberries native in Florida, as well as several kinds of huckleberries (*genus Gaylussacia*) that sometimes get mistaken for blueberries (*genus Vaccinium*). The easiest way to determine which of the two genera a plant is in is to peel a berry and examine the seeds. If the berry contains exactly ten nutlets arranged in a circle like sections of an orange, you've got a huckleberry and you may as well not read the rest of this essay, which is about blueberries. If the seeds are smaller, not arranged like sections of an orange and not numbering ten, you've probably got a blueberry.

The next problem, if you were trying to identify your blueberry, would be to figure out which of the seven Florida species you have, but let's skip that, since you can grow all seven by approximately the same recipe. I should have asked at the beginning why you want to grow blueberries. If your answer has anything to do with pies and muffins, you're reading the wrong essay. You should be reading the "Blueberry Fact Sheet," a copy of which you can get free by calling your County Agent's office. If your answer has something to do with attracting birds into your yard, or seeing lots of bell-shaped flowers in March, or beautiful foliage, you're in the right place.

If there were space here and if I thought I could hold your attention long enough, I'd try to develop five topics: (1) How to grow blueberry plants from seed (it's easy if you follow the recipe). (2) How to start blueberries from stem cuttings and from rhizome cuttings. (3) Why you shouldn't transplant wild blueberries (it's one of the harder ways to start a plant and it depopulates the woods)



Fruit of *Vaccinium ashei*, the native "rabbiteye blueberry" from Washington County in the Florida panhandle.

and how to do it if you insist. (4) How to grow the plant in your yard once you've got it well rooted. (5) How and why to grow blueberries as potted plants. Maybe your editor will allow me to try 1, 2, 3, and 5 later. For now I'll briefly attack number 4.

Let's assume you have some blueberry plants. For example, maybe you bought some varieties such as Woodard, Tifblue, Climax, Southland, Delite, Bluebelle, Aliceblue, or Beckyblue from a garden store. As it says in the Blueberry Fact Sheet, these are domesticated forms of *Vaccinium ashei*, which is native in northern Florida. With both wild and domesticated blueberries, you have to have two different varieties near each other to get a full crop of berries.

To grow blueberries you need to: (1) Have a soil pH between 4.0 and 5.5. This is probably lower than you have in your yard. If so, you should lower the pH by working into the soil two pounds of wettable sulfur per 100 square feet of treated soil. Treat a circle at least one yard in radius around each plant. (2) Choose a planting site that is in full sun or is partially shaded by pines. (3) Dig a four-gallon hole for each plant. Mix two gallons of the exhumed soil with two gallons of wet Canadian peatmoss and use the four gallons of mixture to place around the roots of the plant. (4) Mulch the plants with a very thick layer of pine straw. (5) Give each plant five to ten gallons of water if there is a drought of ten days or more during the growing season. The water requirements of blueberries are like those of azaleas. Just because some wild blueberries grow in swamps, don't assume you should treat them like water lilies. (6) Fertilize: I'm almost afraid to recommend it because blueberries are extremely

sensitive to overfertilization or to fertilization with the wrong stuff. However, I'll risk it because proper fertilization will double the growth rate and help keep the soil pH low, which in turn keeps the leaves from turning white from iron deficiency. Spread fertilizer evenly over a circle centered on the plant and having a radius of one yard. Fertilize the area from the base of the plant outward to the perimeter of the circle. Use sulfate of ammonia (ammonium sulfate). Use one ounce of ammonium sulfate per plant each time you fertilize and fertilize every two months throughout the year. If you can't find ammonium sulfate there are three reasonable alternatives: (1) Once each year spread wettable sulfur at the rate of one pound per 100 square feet over the pine straw mulch. (2) Use azalea-camellia fertilizer instead of ammonium sulfate. Use only one-half ounce per plant six times a year. As with ammonium sulfate, spread the fertilizer on top of the pine straw mulch and let the rain carry it down. (3) Spread two pounds of cottonseed meal around each plant three times a year.

With luck and care, your blueberries will last longer than my mother's.

(The "Blueberry Fact Sheet" referred to in this article is available from your County Extension Office. Ask for FC-46.)

"The Cactus family is large and varied. It is a strictly American family of plants, but after the discovery of the New World, the early explorers sent many of them to Europe as curiosities.

"The species of Cacti adapted to our Florida climate require little care. I know of no other plants which can stand so much neglect unharmed. You may leave them for weeks or months and, if they are dry, when you return, your Cacti will be in as good condition as when you left. They really resent pampering.

"The *Opuntias*, or Prickly Pears, also known as Indian Figs, are familiar to every tiller of the soil in Florida. They are common in field and forest, and are most unpopular with the orange growers, as their spines are long and exceedingly sharp with barbed prickles that penetrate deep into the skin. Woe to the hand reaching for the brilliant, yellow flowers, or large pear-shaped fruits!"

• Dr. Henry Nehrling