

Selecting and Planting Blueberries

Nurseries in the Santa Cruz area are currently stocking young blueberry plants, so now is the time to plant your own berry bush. “People don’t usually think about growing blueberries in Santa Cruz,” says Liz Milazzo, field production manager at the UCSC Farm, “but by paying attention to a few important factors they can be a great addition to your garden.”

Choosing a Variety

The first key is to choose a variety with “chill hour” requirements that match your location. “If you don’t match the chill hours of the plant to your site the plants won’t come out of dormancy properly and you won’t get a good fruit set,” says Milazzo. The most successful berries for the Santa Cruz area will be Southern Highbush varieties, hybrid crosses developed at the University of Florida in the 1990’s, now widely grown in the coastal South, California, Chile and Argentina. Southern Highbush varieties have chill hour requirements ranging from 200 to 600 hours and stay evergreen in Santa Cruz.

Of the 14 Southern Highbush varieties trialed at the UCSC farm, ‘Southmoon’ is the staff’s pick – good yields and excellent, even memorable flavor. ‘Ozark Blue’ is a heavy yielder of good-tasting, large, light-blue berries. ‘Santa Fe’ has great flavor and ripens early, but is not as prolific as ‘Southmoon’. ‘Jewel’ has a large, woody frame that can reach five feet in height, and can work well as a shrub or hedge in the landscape. Milazzo notes that you’ll boost fruit production if you plant more than one variety, perhaps because multiple varieties increase the length of time that pollen is available to bees and other pollinators and thus encourages better pollination.

Preparing the Soil

Once you’ve picked your varieties and selected a planting site with a minimum of six hours of full sun a day, the next key step is to properly prepare the planting hole (or potting mix if you’re planting in a container).

Blueberries require soils with a pH between 4.5 and 5.5. You can test your soil’s acidity with a home pH test kit, but since most native soils in the Santa Cruz region aren’t acidic enough for blueberries to thrive, it’s likely you’ll need to amend your soil.

To lower the soil’s pH (increase its acidity), dig a shallow hole about 12” deep by 14” wide and backfill it using half the soil you removed and half pre-moistened peat moss; note that peat moss is hydrophobic, so if it is not pre-moistened, it will reject water, leading to poor soil irrigation. Blueberries do well with high organic matter, so also amend the planting hole with some good organic compost. If planting in a pot, use an acidic potting mix combined with compost.

Since blueberries like well-drained conditions, build up a small mound or berm on which to plant. To maintain the soil’s acidity count on mulching each year with a thick

layer (3–4”) of wood chips, redwood duff or pine needles. Fertilize your berry plant in the spring with an organic fertilizer, either animal-based (fish, feather, or blend of animal products) or organic cottonseed meal, according to package directions. Work the fertilizer into the top couple of inches of soil below the mulch, and water well after fertilizing.

Maintaining Soil Moisture

Maintaining soil moisture is another key to success. Blueberries have relatively shallow roots and require consistent watering, so be sure to plant them in a spot where it’s convenient to irrigate. When watering you can help maintain the soil’s acidic conditions by adding a tablespoon of household vinegar to each gallon of irrigation water. A simple trick for this is to leave a bottle of vinegar (distilled, wine or apple cider will all work) and a measuring spoon near your watering can.

If you’re installing an irrigation system, Milazzo recommends drip tape over microsprinklers in order to keep the plant canopy as dry as possible to avoid fungal diseases. And although this means delaying the pleasure of harvesting your own berries, she also recommends removing the plants’ flowers the first year they’re in the ground to encourage a good strong plant that will produce more over time.

Milazzo also notes that despite their finicky reputation, blueberries are actually pretty tough. “If yours aren’t thriving where you planted them, consider digging them up and moving them to another spot, or putting them in a 7- to 10-gallon pot,” she says.

You can learn more about how to successfully grow blueberries in your yard or garden at the upcoming workshop, Growing Blueberries in the Home Garden, led by Liz Milazzo.

The workshop takes place on Saturday, February 16, from 10 am – 1 pm at the UCSC Farm. \$20 Friends of the Farm & Garden, \$30 general public, \$5 UCSC students. Pay at the door by cash or check, or register online at <http://blueberry.bpt.me>. Call 831.459-3240 or email casfs@ucsc.edu for additional information. *Note: rainout date is Saturday, February 23.*

- Abby Huetter, Liz Milazzo, and Martha Brown

Liz Milazzo describes blueberry plant care at the UCSC Farm.

