

Rabbiteye Blueberries

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Rabbiteye blueberries (*Vaccinium ashei*) are grown in popularity all across the South. Part of the reason for the popularity of rabbiteye blueberries may be that no major pests have been indentified on them. As increasing numbers of northerners move south, the demand for blueberries will increase. Southerners have not yet discovered the outstanding quality of rabbiteye blueberries. They associate them with wild heckleberries and sparkleberries, which are in the *Vaccinium* family but are characteristically small and tasteless.

Varieties

Most cultivated varieties are mature in 10 years and will be 15 feet tall and 10 feet wide. The bush will consist of numerous suckers, which develop from the crown area. The fruits are borne in the top of the bush on shoots which grew the year before. The berries have a typical blueberry shape, a delicious taste and a good sugar content

Woodard is a large, light blue rabbiteye blueberry that ripens early. The bush is moderately vigorous and the fruits are very high-quality. *Woodard* is a must variety in any planting.

Tifblue is the most universally outstanding rabbiteye blueberry grown to date. The fruits are large, light blue and ripen late in the season. The bush is vigorous and very productive. *Tifblue* is more cold hardy than most rabbiteye blueberries varieties. It should be the predominant variety in any planting.

Garden Blue produces a very small, light blue midseason fruit. The bush is moderately large.

Delite is good as an ornamental. The fruits are small and light blue (red and pink when immature)

Briteblue is a new, moderately vigorous plant, which produces firm, large, light blue berries in moderate to heavy crops. The berries have a waxy bloom and should not be harvested before they are fully ripe. It normally ripens inearly to midseason.

Climax is a new rabbiteye blueberry, which is early ripeining. Most of the fruit ripens in a short period of time. The crop load is moderate to high.

Brightwell is a vigorous, upright plant, which produces outstanding yields of medium-sized fruit. It ripens early to midseason.

Sharpblue is a variety from the Wayne Sherman program at the University of Florida. It is a low-chiller for areas receiving 600 hours or less of temperatures below 45 degrees.

Soil and Climate

Rabbiteye blueberries are one of the few crops that require very special soil; a pH of 4.0 to 5.0 is required for good plant growth; the plants will not live in soils with a pH above 5.5. The plants' feeder roots are very close to the surface and do not have root hairs; therefore, good soil moisture management and heavy mulches will be needed. Deep sandy soils cannot be used unless they are drip irrigated. Unmodified, heavy clay soils with poor aeration and little internal drainage will not do.

Pollination

Rabbiteye blueberries benefit from cross-pollination. At least three varieties should be in every planting. Orchard bees and bumble bees are extremely important. Small commercial growers should promote areas around their orchard for natural nesting to provide enough bees during full bloom to insure good cross-pollination.

Spacing and Planting

Plants for rabbiteye blueberry plantings should be treated with glyphosate herbicide and well-tilled three months before planting to kill all weeds. In low flat areas, the beds should be raised to aid surface drainage. Work organic matter as thoroughly and as deeply as possible into the planting spot prior to planting. Shredded pine bark or peat moss are the best sources of organic matter. Till 1/4 and 1/2 bushel of organic matter into the soil for each plant prior to planting. Two-year-old transplants give the best growth. Nurseries propagate them from small stem cuttings. Purchase bare-root or container plants from a well-known nurseryman or order directly from an exclusive rabbiteye blueberry nursery. Make certain the bare roots do not dry out, and, where container plants are used, separate the roots from the container ball when planting. Plant 1 inch deeper than they grew in the nursery row. Cut the tops back one-half at planting to balance the tops with the roots. Set the plants on rows 10 to 12 feet apart; space plants no closer than 6 feet apart unless you want a hedge for limited space. The plants will crowd when mature if spaced closer than 6 feet.

Fertilizer and Mulch

Rabbiteye blueberries are very sensitive to commercial fertilizer. Use only ammonium sulfate or special azalea or camellia fertilizers. They should be used in frequent, very small applications rather than one heavy application. Do not use the nitrate-type fertilizers - they can kill the plant- and don't apply any commercial fertilizers the year the plants are set. Apply 1 oz. of ammonium sulfate the second year. The rate can then be increased 1 oz. per year but shouldn't exceed 1/2 lb per plant. Broadcast the fertilizer evenly around the plant before applying mulch in late winter. Mulch is very important for growing blueberries. It is required for acidifying and cooling the soil, conserving soil moisture and controlling weeds. Provide a deep mulch (approximately 3 to 4 inches deep) and extend it at least 2 feet from the crown of the plant. This is extremely important the first 2 years while the plants are

establishing. Various organic materials such as peat moss, pine straw, pine bark, leaves and grass clippings can be used. But do not use barnyard manure; it contains toxic salts. If weeds grown through the mulch, remove them by hand or with grass-selective contact herbicides.

Irrigation

The volume of water should correspond to season, plant size and soil texture. Initial spring watering should be relatively light. Once in full growth, 1-year plants should receive 1/2 gallon per day. Increase the rate to 1 gallon the second year, adding a gallon per year per plant to a maximum of 5 gallons per day, or 35 gallons per week. Water once per week rather than daily. Water is especially important during the long fruit-ripening period.

Pruning

Rabbiteye blueberries require little pruning. Lower limbs can be thinned out to keep the fruit from touching the soil, and excessively vigorous upright shoots can be thinned out several feet from the ground to keep the center of the bush open and to keep the bearing surface within reach. Spindly, weak, or dead branches should be thinned out annually during the dormant season.

Harvest

Rabbiteye blueberries are a non-climacteric fruit and should be allowed to ripen on the bush. The fruit of most varieties will ripen over a 4 to 6 week period. A normal season can extend from late May to late July. Don't pick the berries until they are fully ripe; otherwise the fruit will be bitter. Once the berries begin to ripen they should be picked every 5 to 7 days. Birds seem to be the key pests. A mature bush can produce 15 lbs of berries (about 9,000 lb per acre).

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