

GROW A YEAR'S WORTH OF BLUEBERRIES

By Melissa K. Norris

Welcome to all my new friends (and some old) from the SuperFood Gardening Summit.

I'm thrilled you're looking to put more home grown food on your table and more importantly, in your mouth!

Within these pages you'll find what's worked best for me on growing blueberries.

I can't wait to see your bounty and share my favorite recipes and preserving methods over the months to come. If you haven't, request to join the [Homestead and Old-Fashioned Living Facebook group](#) for a community of other people just like you who are growing, cooking, and preserving their own food (make sure you answer the questions for approval).

If you're like me and are a visual learner, you'll love my YouTube channel (I post new videos every Wednesday) especially the Raise Your Own Food playlist. [Click here to watch the videos and subscribe!](#)

Now onto growing your blueberries!

Blueberry Growing Guide

While blueberries are a very easy crop and plant, there are a few things you need to know to ensure success.

Blueberry Growing Requirements

Blueberries require chill hours (number of hours between 32° and 45° Fahrenheit) in order to produce fruit. Number of chill hours on average are 500 + hours of chill time.

To find blueberry varieties listed by either high or low chill hours, [click here to this chart by Fall Creek Nursery](#)

Blueberries like acidic soil. In fact, blueberries are one of the most acidic loving plants of all, preferring an acidity level between 4.09 and 5.0 pH. If rhododendrons and azaleas grow well in your area, then blueberries should too. If you plan on growing any of your own food, knowing your gardening zone and the pH level of your soil is important.

You can order home soil testing kits online or check with your local county extension office. Most county extension offices offer soil testing. (For more info help [click here for How to Test Soil Ph & Amend Acidic or Alkaline Soil](#))

A good rule of thumb is to look at the blossoms on a hydrangea bush. If they're pink, your soil is more alkaline, if the blossoms are closer to blue, then you have more acidic soil. Of course, this is a rough estimate. An actual soil test will give you a truer reading.

In regards to blueberries, most people will need to add acidity to the soil. There are a few ways to add acid to your soil. If your soil only needs slight amending, pine needs or wood shavings from pine and fir. (This is why our soil in the Pacific Northwest is already slightly acidic). Other sources are peat moss and elemental sulfur. Note: you should only change your pH level by 1 point in a year's time.

Blueberries will grow the best in USDA zones 3 through 8, depending upon the variety. If you can find a local gardener, always try and talk to them. Many zones have micro-climates or zones in them, which means you may be able to get away with growing something in your area that you wouldn't think you could.

Blueberries are best planted in late winter or early spring (depending on how frozen your soil is).

Things to consider when choosing your variety.

Depending upon your climate, do you want an early, mid, or late-season harvest?

Because our summers don't typically become really sunny until after July 4th (if you're from the west side of Washington state, you'll know this a long standing joke with some truth to it) I prefer mid to late-season so my berries have plenty of time in the sun to sweeten up.

This is a [great reference chart](#) for showing which varieties are best for which harvest season

Common early season varieties

Bluetta
Blueray
Duke
Earliblue
Patriot
Spartan

Mid-season variety

Bluecrop
Bluegold

Coville
Collins
Hardyblue
Herbert
Legacy

Late season variety

Elliot
Herbert
Jersey
Late Blue Nelson

Where to plant

Blueberries need full sun for the best production, though they may tolerate some late afternoon shade. You'll want to pick an area that gets adequate sunlight.

If you don't have a large yard, many blueberry varieties grow quite well in containers. **Note:** if your soil is extremely alkaline, it's easier to change and maintain the PH level in a container or raised garden bed.

Blueberries have a fairly shallow root system, which makes them a good candidate for containers, but they also don't like to have their roots kept too wet. Good draining soil is key for the long time health of your bushes. Providing a good mulch, we use cedar and fir shavings, will also help keep moisture in the ground during the drier summer months.

Mature blueberry plants can become up to six feet tall. Make sure you plant them at least three feet apart to allow for air circulation and keep rows between six to eight feet apart to get lawnmowers or tillers between them.

Blueberries are a self-pollinating plant, meaning you don't need a pollinator, but you will get a better harvest if you have more than one plant and one variety nearby. Plus, who wants only one bush worth of harvest.

Smaller bushes suited for container planting

Patriot

Sunshine Blue

Top Hat

When to plant

Planting in the late winter or early spring is generally the best time to get your new fruit trees or bushes in the ground. As long as the ground isn't too frozen to dig a hole, you should be good to go.

Bare root stock should be planted in winter, while container stock can be planted into spring.

A good rule of thumb is to check the local nursery's in your area. If they have bare root fruit trees and other fruit plants out, then it's time to begin planting. Your goal is to have the fruit tree/plant in the ground so the roots can get over the shock of transplanting and begin establishing their root system before the stress of summer and the work of growing leaves and fruit begin.

Bare root plants are usually the cheapest route to go.

If you plan on moving an established fruit tree or fruit plant or planting a bare root or potted tree, be sure you dig a hole twice as wide and twice as deep. Create a cone shape of dirt in the bottom of the hole and spread the roots out and down this dirt cone (same technique in [How to Plant Strawberries](#))

Back fill the hole with loose dirt and a layer of compost. If any of the roots are broken, remove them before planting. Keep the level of dirt at the same level it was in at the nursery. You can usually see the line on the trunk of the tree or bush. Create a mote around the base of the trunk to allow the water to filter down onto the roots instead of running off into the surrounding soil or land.

Use a small amount of water when you plant the bush . The soil will settle and you'll be able to see where you need to add more dirt. Don't over water in the winter months. In the late spring, when the bush leaves out and soil becomes dry, water deeply once a week.

Throughout the first summer, you'll want to water the plant once a week if you don't have any rain fall. I neglected to this with one of our new apple trees and lost it. So even in the rainy Pacific Northwest, you'll still want to follow the rule of watering deeply once a week with a newly planted bush.

First year care

The first year you won't get a harvest from your blueberry bushes. In fact, if you see blossoms, remove them. We want all of the energy to go into establishing a good root system for our new bushes and not into trying and produce fruit, especially if you purchased and planted one-year-old bushes.

Make sure you don't let the plant become stressed and provide water during the first summer.

Fertilizer

Blueberries will do better if you apply some fertilizer in the late winter and early spring. We put a mixture of dried manure (chicken and cattle as we raise both of those on our homestead) and sawdust and wood chippings. You don't want fresh manure as it's too hot and can burn the roots of the plant. I also add in our used coffee grounds for a boost and it breaks down into a wonderful compost.

I've found various reports on the acidity of used coffee grounds. Some articles say it's only about a 5 while others say it's more. Regardless of how acidic it is, it's excellent food for your bush and something most of us have on hand. I put a good layer of this around the base of my blueberry bushes, making sure to mix it up so it doesn't grow mold. Here is my article on [4 tips for using coffee grounds in the garden](#).

Pruning

Blueberries are a fairly slow growing plant. If your plant is only a year or two year old, don't prune it yet (only remove dead or broken branches), just let it grow and establish its root system.

Here in the Pacific northwest and we're a gardening zone seven the end of January into February. The reason for that is because you can see your fruit bud, so you know where your fruit blossoms are going to be and where you're going to have your blueberries versus what is just the leaf buds, and this is going to be really important when you're making your pruning cuts and your pruning decisions.

It's best if you can prune on a dry day, so when your blueberry plant is only one or two years old, the only thing that you would prune for would be any broken or disease branches. After that as you start to get into three, four, five, six and hopefully decade old blueberry plants. Then you're going to be making some more severe cuts and I'm going to walk you through each of those.

The first thing that we're going to look for is the new growth versus dead or diseased growth. Your new growth you're going to be able to visually see really easy, it's the bright red color and more supple and viney looking. Your old growth is going to be the darker gray and more woody looking wood. Then you're going to have areas where you have got dead branches and you can see

those because they're usually very dark brown. Sometimes there'll be black and they don't show any signs of new growth.

The first cut that I make when I'm looking at a plant and we're getting ready to prune, and this going to be true no matter what age the plant is, even your younger ones, is you want to cut out any of the dead areas.

Whenever we're making a pruning cut, when we're cutting out dead, we're going to do it at a 45 degree angle and a nice sharp and clean cut. Pruning shears are essential and you want to make sure that they're nice and sharp. Remove all dead branches.

Pruning for a larger fruit harvest

When a blueberry plant is three years old, you'll begin pruning to encourage a healthy plant and larger harvest.

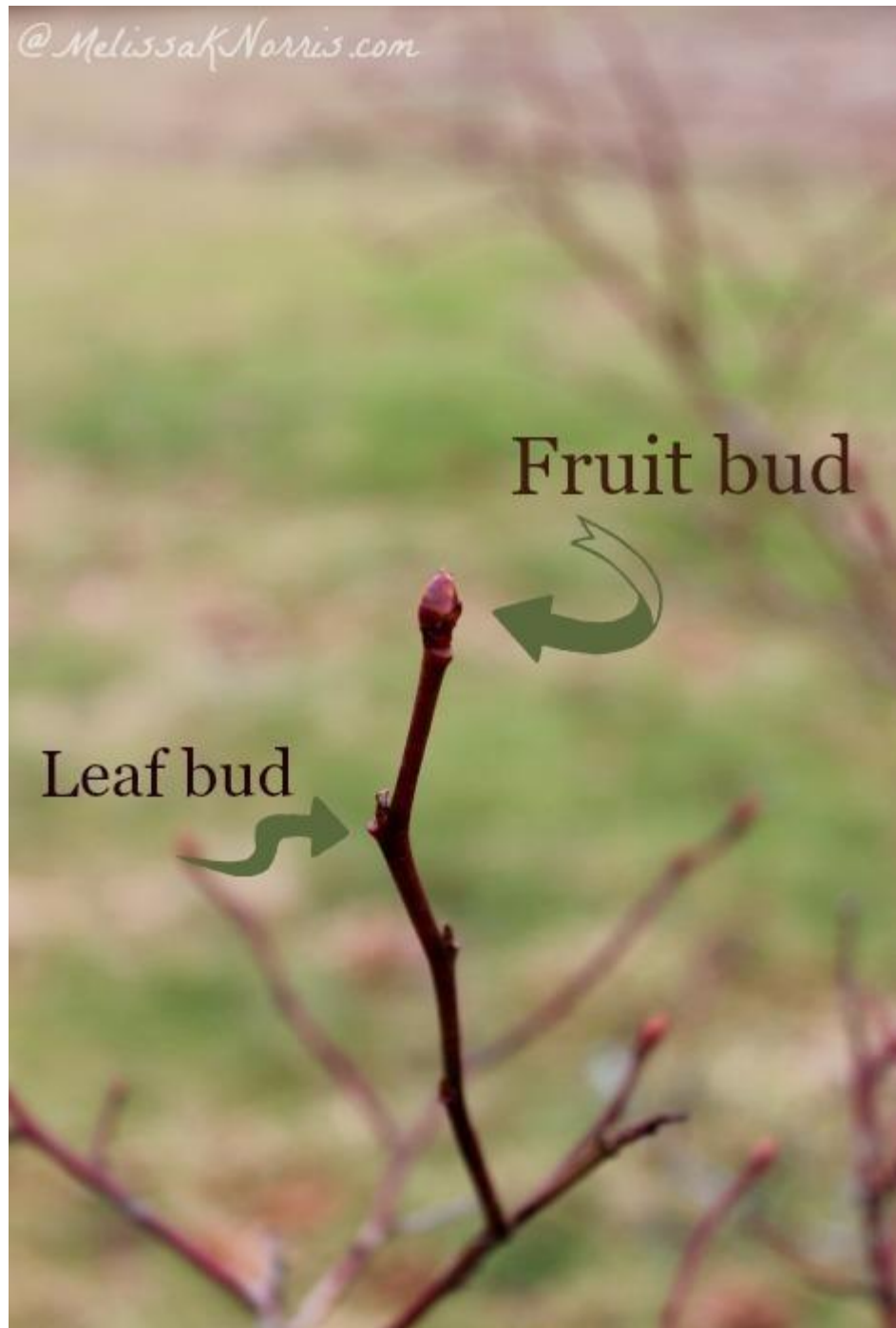
You need to identify what is a fruit bud and what is a leaf bud.

Branches with lots of fruit buds should left.

Branches with only leaf buds should be removed.

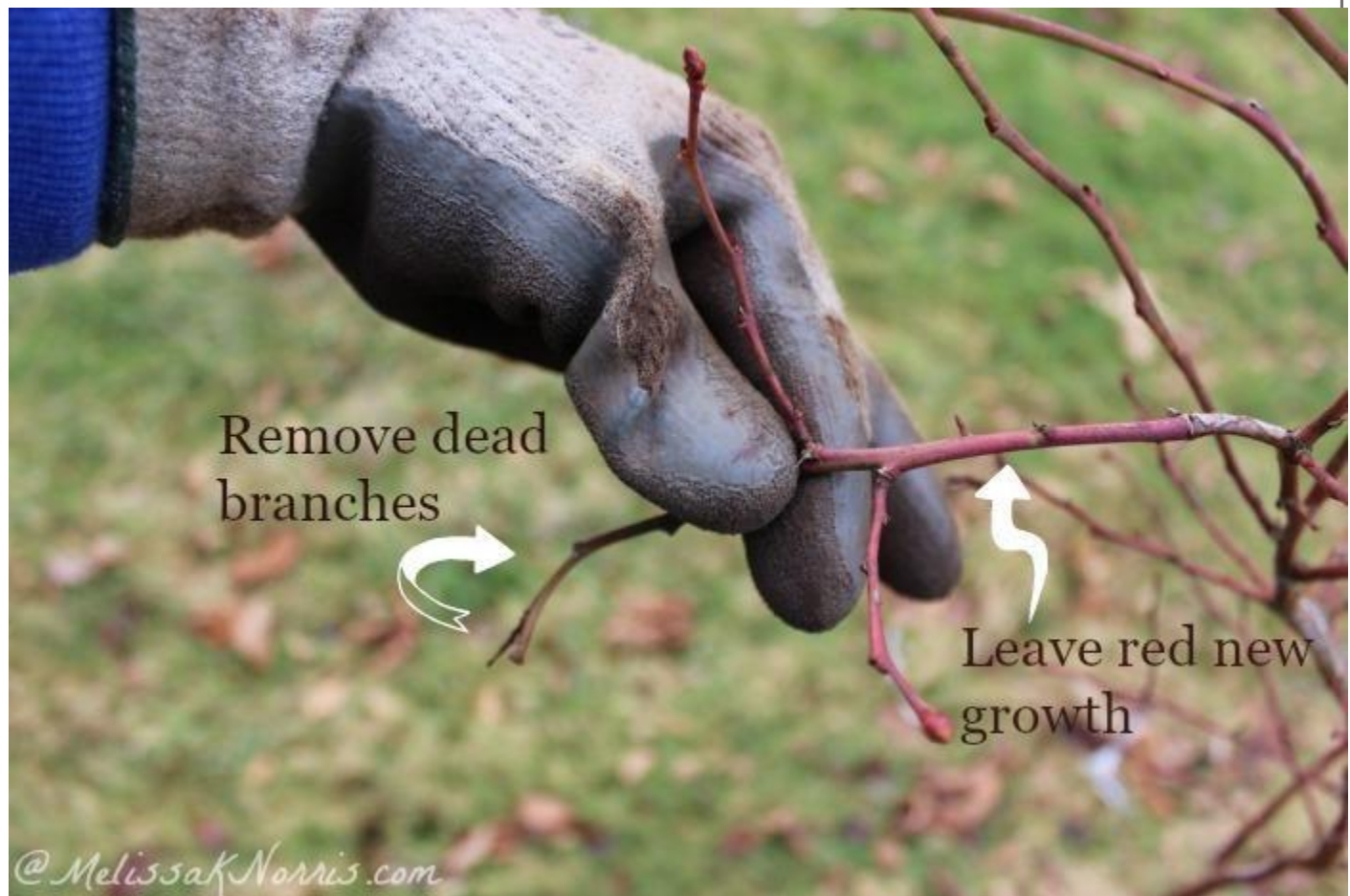
You always want to make sure you remove any of the material that you're pruning. You don't want to leave the dead or disease branches in.

When you're looking at the center of your blueberry bush, you want good air flow. Any branches that are



six years or older, which is going to be characteristic of being a lot thicker around dark, should be pruned out.

Always remove any branches that are rubbing, these are spots ripe for disease or insects to prey upon.





Blueberry Harvest

One of the most frustrating things when it comes to harvesting your blueberries is when the birds or deer beat you to it.

Berries are ready to harvest when they reach a dark blue. I generally find they need at least about 4 to 6 days after they first turn blue to be truly sweet.

But the birds will often sneak in and strip a bush clean in less than 24 hours as soon as the berries are blue.

The best defense we've found is to use netting. I drape it over the bushes while berries are still green (or even after pruning time) making sure to tie it tight at the bottom of the plant (so birds can't sneak in at ground level).

Simply remove the netting after the berry harvest!

I hope you've enjoyed this guide and the presentation within the SuperFood Gardening Summit. Keep an eye out on your inbox for more goodies and resources from me to help you create a homegrown and handmade life!



Best,

Melissa