

Growing Blueberries

Although non-natives, blueberries can be grown in eastern Kansas for gardeners willing to work and plan ahead.

A relative to azaleas and rhododendrons, blueberries require an acidic pH, between 4.8 and 5.2. Most eastern Kansas soils will have a higher pH than blueberries will tolerate, so an essential first step is a soil test to determine how much your soil's pH will need to be reduced.

For a soil pH up to 5.5, you can add sphagnum peat moss to lower the pH. An amendment of 2 cubic feet per 100 square feet will be adequate. If your pH is between 5.5 and 6.0, add 1 pound of sulfur per 100 square feet in *addition* to the peat moss. A pH of 6.0 to 6.5 can be amended with 1.5 pounds of sulfur per 100 square feet. Any pH above 6.5 can be lowered with 2 pounds of sulfur per 100 square feet, along with doubling the amount of sphagnum peat moss earlier suggested.

Aluminum sulfate should be avoided when correcting soil pH because excessive levels of aluminum can be toxic to blueberries.

Sulfur can be applied as a dust, but pelletized sulfur is much easier to spread. With a row width of 5 feet, treat only the soil in the row you will plant in. Blueberries plants should be spaced 5 feet apart.

Although blueberries can be planted in spring or fall, sulfur takes times to react with the soil to lower the pH. Allow as much time as possible between sulfur applications and planting. Fall soil amendment and spring planting is the preferred timing. In addition to pH adjustment, organic matter should be incorporated into the blueberry row. Sphagnum peat moss will suffice for organic matter.

Like many fruits, blueberries will bear more fruit if you plant more than one variety. There are many recommended varieties but Bluecrop and Patriot are both well suited for Kansas.

Unlike many plants, blueberries don't have root hairs, so watering and mulching well are essential. Sawdust, straw and wood chips all make suitable mulch for blueberries. Sawdust combined with woodchips is a winning combination. If any sawdust is used, make sure to rake the mulch every few weeks to avoid creating a cake-like layer that prevents water penetration. Mulch at a depth of 3 inches and consider adding a drip or trickle irrigation system under the mulch. Blueberries prefer moist, but never waterlogged soils. During Kansas summers watering twice a week, with enough water to wet the soil to a depth of 8 inches, should suffice. In cooler spring and fall temperatures, once a week watering will work.

Mulch will also help to control weeds, but if any emerge around the plants, they should be removed. Weeds can be serious water competition for blueberries.

With all the soil amendments needed prior to planting blueberries, no fertilizer should be added during planting. During the spring and summer, blueberries do best with a frequent, light application of nitrogen.

For those seeking the fresh blueberry flavor, with less of a hassle, consider trying blueberries in a container.

Container varieties are generally half-high plants that are the result of a cross between highbush and lowbush blueberry species.

The pH needs for container blueberries are the same; between 4.8 and 5.2. For containers, blueberries can be grown in just sphagnum peat moss, if all nutrients are provided. An easier mix is half sphagnum peat moss and half potting soil. This will provide nutrients as well as a heavier, more wind resistant, pot.

Containers as small as 2 gallons can be used for blueberries, but larger will offer even more wind stabilization as well as providing a larger moisture reserve.

As with traditionally planted blueberries, water is essential. Potting soil should be kept moist. When you're choosing a spot for your blueberry container, pick one near your water source.

Although blueberries are winter hardy, their roots are not! Pots should be moved to a garage (unheated) or you can bury them in soil or mulch in early November. Water periodically through the winter.

As with your planted blueberries, multiple varieties near each other will increase fruit crop yields. Top Hat and Northsky are both suitable varieties. Each will grow to be about 18 inches tall, although Northsky will grow wider than Top Hat. Northblue is a higher fruit bearing variety but can reach heights of 2-3 feet. North Country is intermediate, 18-24 inches high, and produces a moderate amount of fruit.

Sheltering your container blueberries from wind will decrease their water needs and the chances of leaf scorch. Still allow 6-8 hours of sun exposure, preferably from the north or east.