



Easy
with **Growing**
the
Instant Organic Gardener
Blueberries,
the perfect food
by Don Rosenberg

Besides their fantastic taste, by now almost everyone has heard about the health benefits of blueberries, widely known as vitamin-rich, antioxidant powerhouses. But did you know blueberries are one of the easiest plants to grow? They have beautiful foliage, especially in the fall; they're simple to grow, rarely suffer from bugs or diseases and will produce for years with only minimal maintenance. Now is the time to plant them in your own backyard.

There are two types of blueberries, rabbiteye and highbush. Rabbiteyes fare better in warmer climates, while highbush does better in the mountains and along the coast. Check with your garden center for what's best in your area. Whichever you choose, select several cultivars. Different plants will cross pollinate, producing a greater harvest.

Here's a trick: Choose groups of three plants and select early-, middle- and late-maturing varieties. Your garden center should be able to tell you which is which. Instead of harvesting 20 pounds of berries over two weeks and running the risk of having too much of a good thing, you'll have a similar harvest over a four- or even five-week period.

Look for one-gallon planters at your local hardware store or garden center – a fair price is \$9 to \$12.

Planting blueberries is easy, but takes a few steps to get the best results. Blueberries like full to partial sun and acidic, well-drained soil. They also don't like

weeds. Here's how to proceed.

1. Remove and discard the sod and dig a shallow hole 6 inches at the deepest point. Set the dirt aside.

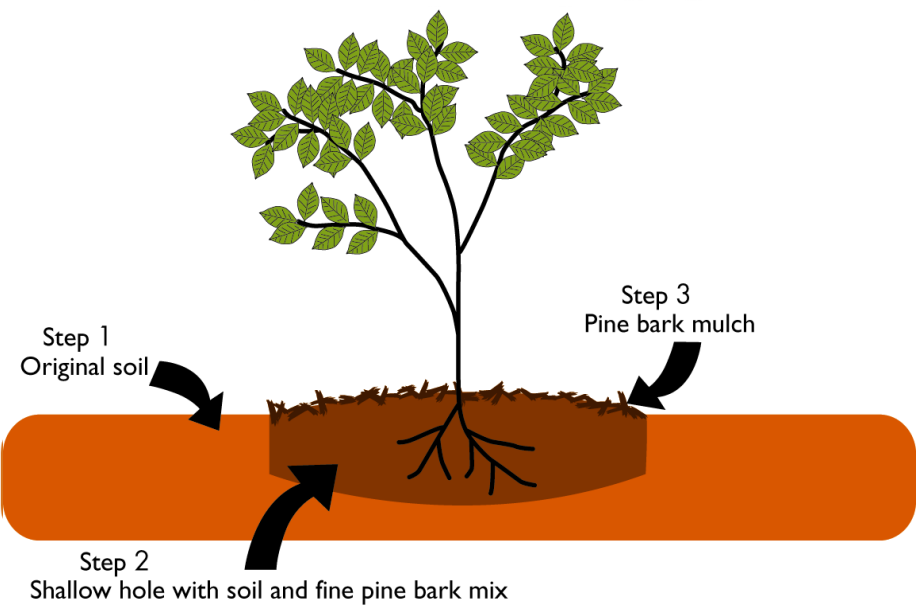
2. Poke some holes in the ground to improve drainage. Get a matching amount of ground pine bark, often called "soil conditioner." It's the fine material left over from processing pine bark nuggets and often comes in 2-cubic-foot bags. Also pick up some Holly-Tone or other organic fertilizer used for acid-loving plants such as azaleas. Mix it all together and place it in the hole. You should end up with a mound of soil.

3. Remove your blueberry plant from its pot. Tease the roots a bit if they're crowded, and plant it so it's at the same level it was in the pot – slightly above the original soil level. Mulch with 2 inches of pine bark nuggets, but don't bury the stem.

4. Make sure to keep the plants well watered as they become established. Place your plants about 5 feet apart.

As the plants grow, remove any crossing branches and three-year-old canes (they'll be woody looking and have deteriorating bark). Then sit back and wait for a fantastic harvest of blueberries every summer for years to come! □

Rosenberg is a regular Charlotte Weekly columnist and founder of the Instant Organic Garden. For more information or to have your questions answered, visit www.instantorganicgarden.com.



While tasty and vitamin rich, blueberries are also surprisingly easy to grow, too. Now is the time to plant, using a shallow hole and fine pine bark mulch. Follow the steps described above.

Illustration concept: Don Rosenberg, design: Debbie Archer