

# Tips for planting blueberries

A trip to the produce aisle at a local grocery store can unveil a host of healthy additions to anyone's diet. Such a jaunt also can raise eyebrows, as produce, particularly organic fruits and vegetables, can be very expensive.

Consumers may feel helpless to corral the cost of healthy foods like fruits and vegetables, but all hope should not be lost. That's especially

so for people willing to give gardening a try.

Blueberries are one of the healthiest foods people can eat. The USDA National Nutrient Database notes that blueberries, which are low in calories and high in fiber, are great sources of the vitamins C, K and B6. However, organic blueberries can be among the most expensive foods in the

produce aisle. Various factors, including where blueberries come from and whether or not they're organic, dictate their cost. But it's not uncommon to pay roughly \$4 for a six-ounce package of organic blueberries. For some, such costs are prohibitive.

Growing blueberries in a home garden can save blueberry lovers substantial amounts of money

while ensuring they reap all of the benefits of this highly nutritious and edible berry. The following are some tips novices can employ as they plant their first batch of blueberries.

- Consult a local garden center. The U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council (USHBC) recommends consulting a local garden center before planting blueberries. The professionals at such centers can recommend the best variety of blueberry to plant. That's an important first step, as the USHBC notes that farmers cultivate dozens of varieties of highbush blueberries across North America. Lowbush varieties also may be a gardener's best option depending on where he or she lives. A local garden center can help you determine which variety best suits your local climate.

• Plant where there is ample sun and well-drained soil. The roots of blueberry plants should remain moist throughout the growing season, so choose an area where the soil drains well. If that's hard to find, consider planting in raised beds or patio containers. In

addition, the University of Minnesota Extension (UME) notes that blueberries require full sun, so plant in a spot where the blueberries will not be denied daily sunlight.

- Prepare the soil. Blueberries require acidic soil, so running a soil test prior to planting is a good idea. Speak with a local garden center about soil adjustments if the soil is unlikely to promote growth.
- Fertilize carefully. The USHBC notes that established blueberry plants will respond well to acid fertilizers. However, it's important not to overdo it, as blueberries are sensitive to overfertilization. Follow fertilization instructions and speak with local garden center professionals for advice.

• Be patient. The UME notes that plants won't bear much fruit in their first two to three years, and that harvests are bigger after five years. So patience is a virtue blueberry planters must embrace.

Planting blueberries can be a rewarding hobby that also can save gardeners money at the grocery store.

## The importance of pollinators

A thriving backyard garden requires homeowners to take steps to ensure the garden has the best environment in which to grow and thrive. The right tools and components, including trowels, rakes and soil, can help gardeners create beautiful spaces. It's also important that pollinators are made to feel welcome in the garden.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that one-third of all agricultural output depends on pollinators. The USDA notes that insects and other animal pollinators are vital to the production of healthy crops for food, fibers, edible oils, medicines and other products. Pollinators also are essential for maintaining habitats and ecosystems that many

wild animals rely on for food and shelter.

The U.S. Forest Service says that, without pollinators, the human race and all of the earth's terrestrial ecosystems would not survive. Pollination done the natural way often yields large, flavorful fruits.

Pollinators are make-or-break components of large-scale agriculture and they're just as important in private home gardens. The Pollinator Partnership, an organization that works to protect pollinators and their habitats across North America, says pollinators include bees, butterflies, beetles, birds and bats. These animals travel from plant to plant carrying pollen on their bodies. The following are some ways to maintain healthy pollinator habitats.

- Consider the soil and types of plants that will thrive in it before choosing what to plant. Fix drainage issues and plant with sunlight in mind.

- Vary the colors and shapes of plants to attract a greater array of pollinators. Plant flowers close to vegetable gardens to attract pollinators.

- Group plants together when planting to more effectively attract pollinators.

- Select plants that flower at different times of the year so that nectar and pollen sources are available year-round.



- Whenever possible, choose native plants.

- Avoid the use of pesticides.
- Provide a water source for pollinators, such as a shallow dish with stones half-submerged for perching.

Pollinators are important for gardens, whether those gardens are commercial operations or small backyard plots. Allow pollinators to share spaces and be mindful of behaviors that can threaten their survival.

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