

Blueberries are a wonderful crop for Tennessee. They were virtually unheard of here when we started fooling around with them 30 years ago. Times change, and blueberries are here to stay.

Just because I've grown them a long time doesn't mean I'm an expert. We grow blueberries for fun, not profit. They're easy to grow and bear beautiful berries over a long period of time. Ours are right by the driveway so neighbors can get to them easily; you can't visit here without getting a good dose of berries.

There are many kinds of blueberries, the cultivated ones are grouped either as Northern or Southern varieties. The Southern ones are called rabbit eyes and common ones are Tifblue, Garden Blue, and Climax. Northern varieties bear earlier and include Blueray, Blue Crop, and Patriot. Tennessee is in between and can grow both kinds, which extends the season by a month.

Unlike most crops, blueberries need the soil to be acid; they like a pH of about 5.5. Elemental sulfur, about a half cup per plant, will bring the pH down sufficiently. Peat moss or rotten sawdust is mixed in when planting them; blueberries thrive with lots of organic matter. They are shallow rooted and do not like to dry out. We use woodchips then have rotted for a few years to mulch the berry patch.

Ours are about six feet apart in rows 10 feet apart. I can get the bush hog through the rows, and we weed in between the plants in the rows. The ones planted eight years ago are really starting to bear well, now.

The older, mature canes are pruned out, as the younger wood produces better berries. We do the pruning in late winter, removing dead and broken branches first. Winter is when they each get a bushel or two of good compost. Commercial growers often use cottonseed meal for fertilizing blueberries, but I don't know what is sprayed on the cotton, so we don't use it here.

Unlike most bramble fruit, blueberries have no thorns, making them a joy to pick. Big, juicy berries roll off of cluster into the pail, if they can get past your mouth. Bugs and disease have not been a problem.

Blueberries

Wednesday, July 23, 2008

Some of our plants look nitrogen-deficient, with a yellow tint to their leaves. They need extra compost. The further decaying of the wood chips robs nitrogen from the soil. Perennial grasses like Bermuda grass compete for soil nutrients and moisture.

The plants have pretty, bell-shaped flowers in the spring, and are pollinated by bumble bees, not honey bees. In the fall, the foliage turns a bright crimson. It's a beautiful plant that I don't know much about. But for muffins, pies, and pancakes, or just living off of from hand to mouth, blueberries certainly have a place near the home, the closer the better.