

BLUEBERRIES, BILBERRIES & PINKBERRIES



Blueberries, Bilberries and Pinkberries (referred to as just blueberries from now on) grow just as well as other fruits in the U.K. provided they are given the special acid conditions they require. If you do not have the appropriate soil, they should be grown in containers. Requirements as to site, shelter and exposure to the sun are similar to those for other soft fruits.

Unless otherwise stated, two varieties should usually be planted to improve pollination and ensure a good set of flowers under adverse weather conditions.

SOIL CONDITIONS & GROWING BLUEBERRIES IN POTS

Blueberries require a deep free-draining soil that has a gritty texture. Heavy soils that have a smooth feel and when turned over with a spade have a polished surface are unsuitable for blueberries. However, if they are high in organic matter and coarse grit is added, they can be brought into the right sort of condition that will support this crop. Blueberries must be grown in a soil with a pH of between 4.0 and 5.5. Soils overlying chalk or limestone and other soils that contain free lime cannot be brought into conditions that will grow blueberries. Soils that are otherwise suitable but have too high a pH can be acidified so that blueberries grow successfully. The pH of such soils should be measured with an electronic meter or chemical testing kit. Each bush should be treated in accordance with the following table with either flowers of sulphur, peat or sawdust, to bring the pH down to 4.0.

pH	Flowers of sulphur				Peat				Sawdust			
	light soil		medium soil		light soil		medium soil		light soil		medium soil	
	m ²	yd ²	m ²	yd ²	m ²	yd ²	m ²	yd ²	m ²	yd ²	m ²	yd ²
5.5	34g	1oz	68g	2oz	10cm	4in	20cm	8in	10cm	4in	10cm	8in
6.5	68g	2oz	136g	4oz	20cm	8in	40cm	16in	20cm	8in	20cm	16in
7.5	102g	3oz	204g	6oz	30cm	12in	60cm	24in	30cm	12in	30cm	24in

The chosen material should be applied twelve months before planting and thoroughly worked into the soil as deeply as possible with a fork or rotavator. Applications of 30cm (12in) or more of sawdust could lead to problems; by substituting some of the sawdust with sulphur or peat, these can be avoided. If planting cannot be delayed for a year, 2 litres (1/2gal) of peat should be mixed with the soil in the planting hole.

Blueberries, Pinkberries can also be grown in containers using an ericaceous compost mixed with an equal volume of sharp sand or grit.

PLANTING DISTANCES

Bushes should be planted 1.2-1.5m (4-5ft) apart and 1.5-1.8m (5-6ft) from other fruits.

MANURING

Blueberries should not be given fertilizers containing lime or calcium. The best fertilizers to use are sulphate of potash and sulphate of ammonia. Before planting, fork into the soil:

35g/m² (1/4oz/yd²) super-phosphate and 20g/m² (3/4oz/yd²) sulphate of potash;

followed by a similar application at the end of March of:

15g/m² (1/2oz/yd²) of sulphate of ammonia.

Each March in the years following, broadcast over the soil 10in (25cm) beyond the spread of the branches:

*15g/m² (1/2oz/yd²) sulphate of ammonia
and 10g/m² (1/4oz/yd²) sulphate of potash*

Alternatively, a lime or calcium free compound fertilizer specially formulated for ericaceous plants (Click here for further details) may be used following the manufacturer's recommendations.

If the bushes do not grow sufficiently well and produce new shoots 30-45cm (12-18in) long, the sulphate of ammonia should be increased by a half or more. If the bushes grow so strongly that new shoots are broken or diseased, the amount should be reduced.

PRUNING

During the two winters after planting, pruning consists only of cutting out diseased or damaged shoots and branches. To encourage the production of strong new shoots, any fat round fruit buds should be rubbed out to prevent the setting of any fruit. In later years, pruning consists of cutting out any new branches that are likely to be borne onto the ground by the weight of crop. The clusters of thin bushy wood that accumulate on the older branches should be cut back to ground level or to strong side branches; this will remove about 20% of the older branches and encourage the production of new growth.

MULCHING

A mulch of sawdust (preferably wet or partly rotted so that it does not blow away) will prevent the germination of weed seeds as well as helping to keep the soil pH from rising. It needs to be as deep as 15cm (6in). Peat or tree bark are also suitable materials for mulching blueberries and need only to be applied to a depth of 5cm (2in). 500 gauge black polythene also improves growth and cropping but without improving soil structure or nutrition.

WATERING

Blueberries should never be allowed to suffer from lack of soil moisture. During the summer water (preferably rain water) should be applied — fully grown bushes require approximately 25 litres/m² (4½gal/yd²) each week from the beginning of June until the fruits begin to ripen. If using tap water, it is best to use it in conjunction with Chempak ericaceous fertilizer which will neutralise the lime in the water.

HARVESTING

Blueberries are ready for picking when the berries are blue/black in colour and detach easily from their stalks by gently rolling the cluster of fruit between the thumb and forefinger; the ripe berries will then fall into the palm of the hand. The fruit needs to be picked every four or five days.