Blueberry Pruning Basics

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Blueberry Pruning

• Know the type
• Why?
• How?
• When?
The Blueberry Plant

Types of Blueberry

• Highbush
  • Northern and Southern

• Lowbush

• Half-High

• Rabbiteye
The Blueberry Plant

- Buds
- Shoot
- Branch
- Cane
- Crown
- Fibrous roots
The Blueberry Plant

Cane Age

• Year 1 canes – reddish brown during winter and are the fruit producing canes
• Year 2-3 canes larger diameter and darker
• Year 4 and older much larger diameter, gray color, rough texture due to lichens
1 year cane

2-3 year cane

4 year and older
Highbush Blueberry

Fruiting Buds
Why Prune Blueberry?

• Develop a framework for young plants
• Remove unproductive canes
• Promote new growth
• Maintain plant vigor and productivity
• Manage crop load and berry size
• Reduce disease pressure
• Rejuvenate older plants
Pruning Tools

- Long handled loppers capable of cutting larger stems
- Smaller bypass pruners for heading and thinning cuts, finish work and shaping young bushes
- Disinfect pruners
Making the Cut

- Make flush cuts to avoid leaving stubs
- Pruning cuts are not treated
- Can time fungicide spray to occur immediately after pruning (especially if late spring or summer cuts are made on active tissue)
When to Prune

- New bushes - prune at time of planting
- All others- Late winter or early spring just before bud swell for 1 year old to mature bushes
- Dormont season pruning reduced the chances of freeze damage at the cut surfaces and enables winter damaged wood to be selectively removed
Steps to Prune Blueberry

• Observe the blueberry bush
• Imaging what it should look like when finished
• Remove all diseased, broken or dead canes and twigs
• Remove weak and twiggy canes that have lots of flower buds
• Remove short and low hanging canes
• Retain strong canes with best and large flower buds
Getting Started

Steps to Prune Blueberry

• Start at Crown
• Open the Center
• Gradually remove older canes
• Start Thinning and Heading branches
• Goal is to have multi trunked bush with strong canes of all different ages emerging from the ground
Starting at the Crown

• Find the crown
• Visualize a 12 - 18 inch circle
• Remove ALL shoots of any age that have emerged from the ground outside of that circle
• Keeps the base narrow
Starting at the Crown

• Remove low lying canes
• Remove canes that crossover or angle through the bush
• Should end up with a narrower bush and mostly upright canes
Starting at the Crown

- Open the center
- Can remove 1-3 large canes to reduce crowding, improve airflow and spray penetration
- Gradually phase out older canes that are larger and grayer in color
- Move quickly and make cuts close to the ground
After Crown Work
As canes age they branch repeatedly

Make cuts to selectively remove clumps of twiggy, brushing looking, thin laterals

Head back any long whips or canes that are too tall

Made with hand held bypass pruners
Pruning at Time of Planting

- Prune or remove flower buds in the 1st year
- Cut back 1/2 to 2/3 of the height at the time of planting
Pruning at Time of Planting

Diagram 1. Pruning at planting:
- Head younger canes back to about 10 to 12 inches in length (1)
- Prune off lower, shorter shoots (2)
Pruning in Year One

- Goal to avoid fruit production
- Remove all flower buds
- Allows bush to grow vegetatively
- End of year one shrub has increased in size and produced more flower buds

Pruning in Year Two

• Remove low lying or weak shoots and cross overs
• Keep healthiest, large upright canes
• Some flower buds may be allowed in year 2 if growth was adequate in year 1

[Diagram showing before and after pruning]

Pruning in Year Two and Three

Diagram 3
Pruning the first 2 to 3 years:
- remove fruit buds (1)
- prune off weak and low-growing shoots (2)
- head new, vigorous canes to about 4 to 6 inches below the top of the bush (3)
Pruning for First Crop

- Allow a few berries
- Goal is still vegetative growth
- Form the structure of the bush for years to come
Pruning in Year Three

• Bush is well established
• Still need to remove 40-50% of the flower buds
• Begin selecting new basal shoots that will replace older canes
Pruning Mature Plants

Diagram 4
Pruning mature blueberry plants:
- remove weak, low-growing shoots (1)
- thin the crown of the plant by cutting out about 20 percent of the canes each year (2)
- head new, vigorous canes to about 4 to 6 inches below the top of the bush (3)
Pruning Goals Mature Plants

• Up to 20% of the wood in a bush can be removed without decreasing yields
• 40-50% of the flower buds will be removed during pruning
• Berry number will be decreased
• Berry size and quality will increase
• End with a multi trunked bush with strong canes of all different ages emerging from the ground
• As an older can is removed, a younger cane is already there to replace it
Demonstration

University of Maine Cooperative Extension
David T. Handley
Extension Vegetable and Small Fruit Specialist

https://extension.umaine.edu/publications/2253e/

• https://youtu.be/fm6ZfpGy5oQ
Resources

• Blueberry Pruning, University of Missouri Extension

• Growing Blueberries in Missouri, Missouri State University
  - https://ag.missouristate.edu/assets/MtnGrv/B44GrowingBlueberries.pdf

• Pruning Blueberries, NC State

• Pruning Blueberry Bushes, The Ohio State University
  - https://ohioline.osu.edu/factsheet/hyg-1430

• Pruning Blueberries, University of Tennessee
Questions

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