

The Beauty and Bounty of Blueberries

The blueberries that were recently planted as part of the Henderson Park landscaping are a great addition to our garden (we already had several blueberry plants around the perimeter of the HPCG). These are all varieties of rabbiteye blueberries, the best for the heat of the South. Regular highbush blueberries are for more northern climates, though hybridizing has created the Southern Highbush – don't know much about these.

Rabbiteyes must have at least 2 varieties close to each other to cross pollinate. Some of the tried and true types include Tiftblue and Climax (our favorites), Premier, Britewell, Woodard, Austin, and Powderblue. The HPCG has at least one of the Georgia River series that includes Alapaha and Ochlockonee.



Blueberries are amazingly simple to grow and harvest. They are not disease prone and need practically no spraying for insects. They thrive in full sun in an acid soil (which occurs naturally in this area) that is rich and well drained (which often needs work to achieve). The beautiful plump fruit hang on the bushes for quite awhile when ripe, so timing of harvest isn't too critical. Finally, in the fall the leaves turn a gorgeous red before dropping off, so they're very ornamental. The hardest part is waiting to pick them until they have turned really, really blue with a faint haze – they get bigger and sweeter after that stage.

About a dozen mature blueberry plants thrive on our property near Homer, Georgia. Years ago we planted peaches, apples, figs, plums, brambles, pecans, and, of course, blueberries. Looking over that field today, the blueberries were really the only successful crop, especially with sporadic long-distance care.

We did find out that a good mulching, fertilizer, and deep watering (pumping from a pond) really jump started them after they sat a couple of years with zero growth (no growth means no fruit). Today they're 8' tall and prolific. Some have even become partly shaded by tall holly trees but they still produce heavily. Every year around Father's Day the first wave of blueberries is ready and we go pick for a couple of hours at a time and feel as if we have barely made a dent in the crop: they make a LOT of fruit. Berries ripen over about a 4 week period depending on the variety mix. It's great!!

After harvest, blueberries are still easy: they stay fresh in the fridge for weeks if they're sealed in plastic bags or containers. To preserve them, I sort them and put unwashed into freezer containers or bags. To use them, I just rinse the frozen berries and put them in oatmeal, pancakes, muffins, pies, sweet loaves, and jams. Of course, thawed out they are soft and not quite as good to eat out of hand as fresh. But still yummy.

I haven't mentioned the nemesis of blueberries: critters. For whatever reason those at Homer are completely untouched by the numerous deer, birds, and rodents. But "city" blueberries, especially those with woods nearby, are very attractive to birds and squirrels. The HPCG blueberry bushes, being in an open location and being numerous may make them less desirable to marauders, time will tell. But if necessary, bird netting is an effective protection though it is a challenge to use. Take off rings, watches, and anything with buttons, as they will snag badly.

Our young blueberry plants at Henderson have a way to go before they are large and bountiful, but we can get them there. Cottonseed meal is frequently recommended as an organic fertilizer, applied in the spring. Keeping a good layer of mulch is essential for those shallow roots. And weekly watering when the weather warms and the rains slow down really makes them grow. Pruning is minor at first, mainly tipping any canes that shoot straight up, so the first few seasons will be easy. Can't wait!

- Caroline