

# BLUEBERRIES

Blueberries are known for their high levels of antioxidants and are particularly sought-after by consumers.

Wyoming gardeners who enjoy a challenge may want to consider growing blueberries. Cold hardy blueberries are easy to come by, are readily available at garden centers and nurseries, and can even be special ordered if a gardener wants a specific variety.

Finding a blueberry that's appropriate for our soils is the tricky part. It's difficult for them to thrive even after amending the soil to a blueberry's liking; however, with the help of season

extension, and selecting blueberry varieties appropriate for containers, Wyoming-grown blueberries may be possible.

## Meeting their needs

Growing blueberries in containers allows gardeners the ability to meet a plant's soil, water, and fertilizer needs. Successfully grown blueberries require soils with a low pH of 4.5 to no more than 6.0 with heavy organic matter. Most Wyoming gardeners feel lucky to have a neutral pH of 7, the majority of soils are higher.

Using pre-mixed soils with high acidity can meet the blueberries' needs without having to amend native soil. There is an option to replot the plants and amend the soil as elements in the potting soil like peat moss and compost begin to decompose. One of the challenges of growing plants in containers is essentially washing away the nutrients as plants are watered and the excess runs out the bottom.

When replanting blueberries into a larger container, place the plant's crown a couple inches below the top of the container but at the top of the soil line. This ensures there is a well to hold water and allow for deep watering and also keeps the growing medium from resting on the base of the plant and potentially causing a source for disease or decay.

Also consider incorporating fertilizer and soil acidifier made from elemental

sulfur. Given the requirement for a low pH range, gardeners need to monitor the acidity levels once or twice a season. Digital soil pH meters and test strips are readily available and can provide guidance if additional sulfur or soil amendments are necessary.

Blueberries have shallow roots and prefer moist soils. Wyoming water, especially untreated well water, is often more alkaline and can cause soil pH to increase. Capturing rainwater to irrigate plants is one option to keep pH from creeping up, but in recent years even rainwater has been more alkaline, so it's important to test the water pH before using. Adding distilled vinegar can improve the pH of water for acid-loving plants.

## Container capabilities

Ten-gallon fabric containers with handles are a good option for growing blueberries. Fabric container benefits with handles include allowing excess water to drain from the soils, reducing root rot, increasing aeration, and the ability to move the containers to ideal locations. Adding mulch such as shredded paper, bark chips, peat moss, or pine needles, helps maintain soil moisture near the surface. Peat moss and pine needles may also help maintain a lower pH.

Choosing the correct variety of blueberries appropriate for container gardening is critical. Blueberries are easily shipped in containers in the



# Using containers can help shepherd blueberries through Wyoming's rough and tumble growing season

mail in spring and early summer. Generally, there are three categories of blueberries, including high bush, low bush, and half-high, which is a cross between high and low-bush.

Most varieties appropriate for containers fall under half-high and a few low bush. High bush simply grow too tall for containers and would likely outgrow the container and need additional support.

Other considerations for variety selection include selecting plants appropriate according to the USDA Hardiness Zone map, berry size, and chill hours. Wyoming zones generally range from 3–5.

Many blueberries are considered self-pollinating but will benefit from cross pollination of other varieties

to increase yields. Chill hours are a specified length of time a plant requires dormancy with temperatures below 45 degrees Fahrenheit to set fruit the following growing season. The table below lists some varieties conducive to growing blueberries in containers in Wyoming. Due to the variances in chill hours and winter hardiness, blueberries grown in containers in Wyoming will likely benefit by relocating the containers into protected areas such as an unheated garage, barn, or high tunnel with the door left open to reduce the temperature. All will provide protection from the wind and reduce freezing the roots. Watering once a month during dormancy will suffice. Dormant plants will not need fertilizer.

Cultivation of wild blueberries occurred just over a century ago in North America, and the popular berry is now grown in the Northern and Southern hemispheres. In the United States, most commercial blueberry production is in states with high moisture, acidic soils, making Wyoming an unlikely state for commercial blueberry production.

Once spring arrives, gardeners can place their blueberries in warm, protected locations to come out of dormancy. Additional protection may be required for late spring storms and frosts. This is especially critical once the berries begin to form flowers. Placing blueberries near one another, outside during the blooming period, can help increase pollination. Once the berries form, they can be returned to a high tunnel or similar place to protect the berries from birds. Cages and netting will also work well to protect berries.

While growing blueberries in Wyoming isn't easy, it does provide a challenge and, best of all, provides gardeners the reward of fresh berries.

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Variety	Height	Berry size	Chill hours	Zone
Burgundy	1 - 2'	S	1,000+	3 - 8
Top Hat	1 - 2'	S	1,000 - 1,200	3 - 8
North Sky	2'	S	800+	3 - 8
North Country	2 - 3'	M	800+	3 - 8
Chippewa	3 - 4'	M - L	800 - 1,000	3 - 8
Patriot	3 - 5'	L	800 - 1,000	3 - 8
Jelly Bean	1 - 2'	L	1,000+	4 - 8
Pink Lemonade	4 - 5'	M	200 - 300	4 - 8
Perpetua	4 - 5'	S	1,000+	4 - 8
Peach Sorbet	1.5 - 2'	M	300	5 - 10
Blueberry Glaze	2 - 3'	S	600	5 - 8
Sunshine Blue	3 - 4'	M	150	5 - 10
Pink Icing	3 - 4'	L	500	5 - 10

Blueberry varieties appropriate for Wyoming's hardiness zones.