Lowbush Blueberry Sod Fact Sheet

Location and Soil Considerations

Before installing lowbush blueberry sod, make sure the location you have selected provides the required conditions. Lowbush or "wild" blueberry requires slightly acidic, well-draining, sandy soil in a location where it is free to grow horizontally. Blueberry also requires full sun for six or more hours per day and prefers to grow on its own away from annual vegetables or other perennial berry bushes. Always plant lowbush blueberry directly into open, ground-level soil; wild blueberry will not thrive in raised beds or containers of any kind.

Since blueberry requires acidic, well-draining soil, it's recommended to have a soil sample tested. You can usually obtain a soil sampling kit from your county's cooperative extension office or a local garden center. If your soil is not acidic enough, sulfur or ammonium sulfate can be applied to lower the pH to a range between 4.0–4.5.

To test soil drainage, dig a hole 12 inches deep and 12 inches wide and fill the hole with water. The next day, fill the hole with water again. Monitor the drainage of the water; it should be completely drained within 8 hours. If the water hasn't completely drained from the hole within 8 hours, the soil is not well-draining. While soil drainage can be improved over time with the addition of compost and organic material, this can take multiple treatments over several years to accomplish.

Sunlight Requirements

Wild blueberries require full sunlight to grow best. If you find that nearby plants are shading your wild blueberries and preventing them from receiving enough sun, you may need to relocate or prune those plants. If the blueberry stems begin leaning towards the sun, that's a sure sign that they aren't receiving enough sunlight.

Lowbush Blueberry Post-Installation

In the weeks immediately after installation, make sure the roots stay covered, especially after heavy rains that may displace any compost or peat moss that was applied at installation. If any roots become exposed, cover them with loam, compost, or peat moss. You may also wish to add a layer of softwood mulch to help retain moisture and aid in root development. Softwood mulch is recommended since it naturally has a lower pH and will not raise the pH of the soil as it decomposes.

Some die-back of the blueberry plants is common after installation and the plants will put on new growth once they've been established. Within a few weeks, the sod should begin rooting into the soil.

Watering

You may use sprinkler systems, drip-line irrigation, or hand watering with a garden hose to water your blueberry sod. Be sure to consider any rainfall received when determining whether to water, as excessive watering can cause disease. For newly installed blueberry sod, water at least 4 times per week for 30 minutes to 1 hour until the plants are established (about 3 weeks). If you notice any change in the color of the leaves, check to see if the soil is damp. If no moisture is present under the top dressing of the sod (approximately 2 inches down), continue the watering routine as described. If the ground is too saturated, refrain from watering for up to 3 days.

Several weeks after installation when the sod is well rooted and established, you can reduce the frequency of watering and water more deeply to encourage deep root growth and drought tolerance. Aim for about one inch of water per week, spread out over the course of the week, including any natural rainfall. This is the watering schedule you'll need to maintain through the growing season in subsequent years.

Encouraging Growth and Plant Health

In order for wild blueberries to become established, root growth is essential. For the first two growing seasons, it's recommended to pinch off all of the blossoms. As painful as that may be, it will ensure that the plants put as much energy as possible into establishing a strong root system and it will substantially improve the long-term health of the plants.

Mow your blueberry patch every other fall (October/November) to 1.5" high using a lawnmower or trimmer. Rest assured, this will not harm the plants. Mowing in alternating years is essential for good berry production, to maintain healthy plants, and to control weed growth. However, this means your plants will not produce berries in the next growing season after mowing.

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If you wish to produce berries every year, mow just half of the crop in fall, then mow the other half of the crop in fall of the next year. You'll enjoy berry production each year on alternating sections. The section that was not mowed in fall will produce berries the following summer. The side that was mowed will put on new growth but will not produce berries during the summer after mowing.

Weed Control

Maintaining a soil pH of 4.0–4.5 will help inhibit the growth of grasses and broadleaf weeds. If the soil becomes too alkaline, the blueberry plants will not thrive and weeds will invade. Apply sulfur to bring the pH into the proper range if needed. If any woody tree saplings or ferns begin growing in your blueberry patch, cutting the unwanted plants is the best course of action. Cut any saplings or ferns to the ground 3 times per year: first, in early summer when they have fully leafed out; let the unwanted plants grow back again, then cut a second time; and repeat this process until the unwanted plants stop growing. If you're continually forcing the unwanted plants to put their energy into above-ground growth, it will draw energy away from root growth and weaken the unwanted plants over time.

Pollination

Your blueberry patch will be pollinated by native bees as well as bees from any honey bee hives that may be nearby. For best berry production, encourage pollinators to visit your blueberry patch by adding a variety of pollinator-attracting plants to your landscape that will bloom throughout the season. Minimize the use of pesticides throughout your landscape; if you do need to use them, research and read labels carefully to choose those that are not harmful to pollinators.

Enjoy the Fruits of Your Labor!

To harvest blueberries, you can pick them by hand or use a metal hand rake. Established blueberry plants can yield up to half a pound of fruit per square foot of plants. This typically occurs after four years if you have been following the recommended care and maintenance instructions. Wash the berries before eating. To extend the shelf life of your harvested blueberries, store them in an open container in the refrigerator.

Troubleshooting

As long as you tend your blueberries well by ensuring that they receive enough sunlight and water, maintain the proper soil conditions, and follow the recommended maintenance instructions, you should enjoy a thriving blueberry patch for years to come. However, if you notice that your blueberry plants are not growing or bearing fruit as well, take a close look at these potential issues:

- **Soil:** Is it draining well, or is it retaining too much water? Is the soil sandy (well draining) or more clay-like (not well draining)? Is the soil so well draining that it is causing water to drain away too quickly? Is the soil acidic enough, with a pH of 4.0–4.5?
- **Sunlight:** Are the blueberries receiving at least 6 hours of sunlight per day? Are there any nearby plants casting too much shade on the blueberries?
- **Water:** Are the blueberries receiving enough water? Is the soil 1" to 2" below the top dressing excessively dry? Be sure to water enough so that the soil remains damp, but not soggy.

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