

# *Fruit Fact Sheet*

Prepared by the University of Massachusetts Fruit Team

## Pruning Blueberries in the Home Garden

*Sonia Schloemann, UMass Extension Fruit Specialist*

Fact Sheet: SF-HH02

### Introduction

Growing blueberries in the home garden can be very rewarding. Fresh, ripe blueberries are delightful especially when picked straight off the bush. They are also very healthful, containing very high levels of antioxidants and other beneficial compounds. Blueberry bushes also offer some aesthetic benefits in the landscape with attractive flowers during bloom and showy foliage color in the fall.

Once established blueberries are relatively easy to maintain. There are fewer pests and diseases that attack blueberry bushes compared to some other fruit crops. Pruning may be the most significant management task involved in successful blueberry culture. This fact sheet is intended to help home fruit growers gain a better understanding of the principles of pruning blueberry bushes.

### Why is pruning important?

Blueberry bushes that have not been pruned on an annual basis become overgrown in both height and branch density and as a result are less productive (Figure 1). Proper pruning of blueberries is key to maintain plant size, shape, and fruit production (Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Blueberry bush before pruning.



**Figure 2.** Blueberry bush after pruning.

### **What are the steps to successfully prune a blueberry bush?**

Understanding of the goals of pruning will help guide how you prune your blueberries. The primary goal of is to generate fruit production. Blueberries product fruit on 'young' wood so removing 'old' wood and continuously generating 'young' wood results in productive bushes. Secondly, you want to create good conditions for fruit production and ripening. An open growth habit for bushes allows for good air circulation and drying conditions which helps reduce the incidence of fruit rots. Also, an open habit allows for sunlight penetration into the fruiting zone and promotes ripening and heightens flavor.

#### **How to approach a blueberry bush when pruning:**

- 1) Visually size-up the blueberry bush from all sides and imagine what the plant should look like when pruning is completed.
- 2) First remove all diseased and broken canes or ones growing too low to the ground.
- 3) Next, canes that are eight years old or older should be removed .
- 4) Remove all but the 2-4 most robust new canes produced the previous year.
- 5) Ultimately, the bush should be:
  - a) narrow at base,
  - b) open in the center, and
  - c) have a balance of multi-age canes throughout the bush.

### **Are individual blueberry varieties pruned differently?**

There may be slight variations in how certain varieties are pruned. Each variety may produce a different number of new canes each year; however, the overall plant structure is generally the same. Most high-bush blueberry varieties will respond similarly in terms of vegetative growth, fruit production, and quality of fruit following general pruning.

### **Can young blueberries be pruned the same as older, mature bushes?**

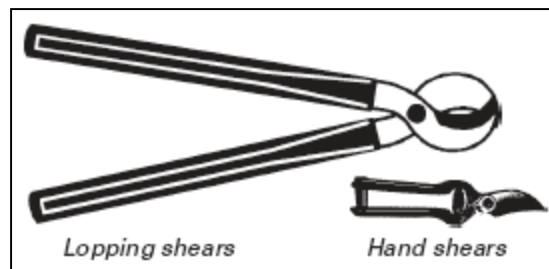
Young bushes generally require less pruning to remove undesirable growth. Mature bushes normally require more selective cuts to maintain a desired shape, plant structure, and productive fruiting wood. The key to pruning young plants is to focus on setting up the overall plant structure that will make the bush fruitful for several years. Bushes that are seven years old and older will need to have a few mature canes removed to maintain a balance between older canes that are becoming less productive and young canes that are not quite into full production.

### **How should older, overgrown blueberry bushes be pruned?**

Blueberry bushes should be rejuvenated to improve fruit production and maintain proper shape. This may require that several old canes be removed and the bushes be pruned to fit the desired shape. Rejuvenating bushes can be quite a challenge if there has been no annual pruning done for several years. The first approach would be to remove any diseased or broken branches. Secondly, depending on the overall number, the oldest two or three canes should be removed to open up the plant structure. As with any blueberry bush, the center of the plant should be open to sunlight and air movement. The base of the bush (at the top of the root crown) should be tighter than the middle to upper portion of the bush. All branches that are touching and crossing should be removed. Sometimes, the best approach is to cut down the entire bush and allow it to regrow from the roots. This will eliminate any fruit production for a couple of years, but results in a rejuvenated and productive bush thereafter.

### **What are the tools used for pruning?**

Hand tools such as loppers, hand pruners, and handsaws can be used for pruning blueberries. All tools should be sharp and clean at the outset. Select the appropriate tool to remove wood as cleanly as possible to avoid unnecessary injury to the plant. Hand pruners can be used to effectively remove one-year-old wood. If the wood is two or three years old, it is suggested that a lopper or saw be used to cut through the heavier wood. Occasionally wood is too thick or positioned in such a way that it is difficult to cut cleanly with loppers or handsaws. In such a case, a cordless reciprocating saw is an excellent tool.



### **Summary**

Learning to master the art and science of pruning blueberries takes time and practice. Contact your University Extension Educator for updated information on pruning. Make sure your blueberries are pruned each year to maintain the size and shape of the bushes to maximize fruit production and increase the overall fruit quality.

*Illustrations from PennState Small Scale Fruit Production Guide used by permission.*

