

Prune like a Pro Blueberries 2022



TITLE: Dormant Pruning of Blueberries

Description: Blueberries belong to the genus *Vaccinium*. East TN gardeners can grow northern highbush blueberries, as well as the more common “rabbit eye” (*Vaccinium virgatum*) varieties. The pruning techniques are the same for both.

Objective(s): Learn how to prune your blueberries for the largest, sweetest fruits your particular variety can produce.

WHAT: You can grow several types of blueberry successfully in your home garden. All are woody shrubs with a similar growth habit, but plant height varies with type. Blueberry plants have a shallow root system, generally no more than 1 to 1.5 feet deep, and a woody plant base called a crown. Once shoots lose their leaves in the fall, they are called canes. **As a cane plant, a blueberry should never be sheared!**

New, vigorous, upright-growing shoots are called whips. The best of these will be kept as replacements for the old canes that are removed.

WHY: Do you want lots of small fruits, or do you want large fruits? Proper pruning will give you the plump, juicy fruits you desire.

WHEN: Most blueberry pruning is done during dormancy, around mid-February in east TN. There is a benefit to also doing some summer pruning, right after the harvest has ended. (Watch for that video later in the year).

WHERE: Old canes (older than 6 years) are removed as close to the ground as possible. Remove 1-3 of these each year.

HOW: Keep your blueberry bush looking like a 5-6 year old plant by removing any canes that are more than six years old. (These are usually more than 1” in diameter.) Increase the size and quality of the fruit by removing fruit buds that are on weak laterals (less than 6”). You can stress the bush by leaving too many laterals with fruit buds, so try to balance the expected fruit crop with the health/vigor of the plant.



SUMMARY OF IMPORTANT POINTS:

- Most pruning is done during dormancy; thin the fruit set to increase fruit quality.
- Remove canes that are more than six years old. Cut them as close to the ground as possible.
- Keep a total of about a dozen canes ranging from 1-6 years in age (that's 2 canes per year).
 - Remove any new shoots that are spindly (smaller than the diameter of a pencil).
 - If the bush produced a lot of new whips, keep 3 or 4 of the tallest and thickest.
 - Prune to increase airflow and sunlight into the middle of the plant, to reduce disease.
- Adequate water is necessary from plant health and fruit set.
 - Fruit buds start to form in the fall, so keep your blueberries well-watered.
- Too many fruit buds will result in small fruit, and may stress the plant.
- Prune a weak plant harder than a healthier plant, as the hard pruning will give it a chance to produce as much new growth as possible.
- The 4 D's (dead, damaged, diseased, dysfunctional) can be removed at any time.
- To renovate a neglected blueberry bush, cut all the older canes to 12". Then thin the old canes to the best ten canes.

Additional Resources / References:

Pruning Blueberries, University of Tennessee, publication SP284-E
<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/documents/sp284-e.pdf>

Home Garden Blueberries, University of Georgia, circular 946 (March 2017)
https://secure.caes.uga.edu/extension/publications/files/pdf/C%20946_4.PDF

Pruning Blueberries, University of Maryland, <https://extension.umd.edu/resource/pruning-blueberries>

Growing Blueberries in Your Home Garden, Oregon State University, pub EC1304 (Dec 2020)
<https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/ec1304/html>

Knox County Master Gardeners website: www.knoxcountymastergardener.org

Knox County Master Gardeners Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/KnoxCountyMG>

Ask-a-Master Gardener / Knox County Extension Helpline: (865) 215-2340

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