



Extension FactSheet

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Pruning Blueberries in the Home Garden

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Introduction

Growing blueberries in the home garden can be quite enjoyable. Blueberries have a very fresh taste when picked straight off the bush. Beyond the initial challenge of establishing a new planting, there are really few pests that attack blueberry bushes. Proper weeding, fertilizing, insect and disease control, and proper pruning help to assure quality fruit at harvest. This fact sheet is intended to help home fruit growers gain a better understanding of the principles of pruning blueberry bushes. Refer to the glossary of terms if you are not familiar with some of the terms used in this fact sheet.

For details on blueberry production, refer to OSU Extension Fact Sheet HYG-1422-98, "Growing Blueberries in the Home Garden" (<http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/1000/1422.html>).

Why is it important to prune blueberry bushes?

Blueberry bushes that have not been pruned on an annual basis may become overgrown and less fruitful (Figure 1). Proper training of blueberries is essential to maintain plant size, shape, and productivity (Figure 2). In the first two years, it is important to train young blueberry bushes to promote the proper structure of the plant for maximum fruit production. When the blueberries mature, their vegetative canes require annual maintenance.

What are the steps to successfully prune a blueberry bush?

Selection of a training system will help guide how you prune your blueberries. Many fruit gardeners prefer

to retain two to three main canes that will anchor the bush's fruit production. Young blueberries are carefully trained to maintain close base at the root crown and an open center to allow sunlight to pass through and allow air movement.

- 1st** Visually observe the blueberry bush.
- 2nd** Imagine what the plant should look like when pruning is completed.
- 3rd** All diseased and broken canes should be removed first.
- 4th** Canes that are seven years old or older should be considered for removal.
- 5th** No more than two to three mature canes should be removed each year to avoid pruning out too many fruit buds.
- 6th** Selective pruning will help to stimulate new cane growth each year.
- 7th** Remove branches that are touching and any dead twigs.
- 8th** The bush should be: a) narrow at base, b) open in the center, and c) free of vegetative clutter.

Shoots harden-off as canes with a grayish-brown color and will be approximately pencil size or greater in diameter. Normally, fruiting buds are not counted on blueberry bushes to determine the maximum fruit load.

Are individual blueberry varieties pruned differently?

Most gardeners in Ohio and other Midwestern states grow high-bush blueberries. There is not a great deal of dif-

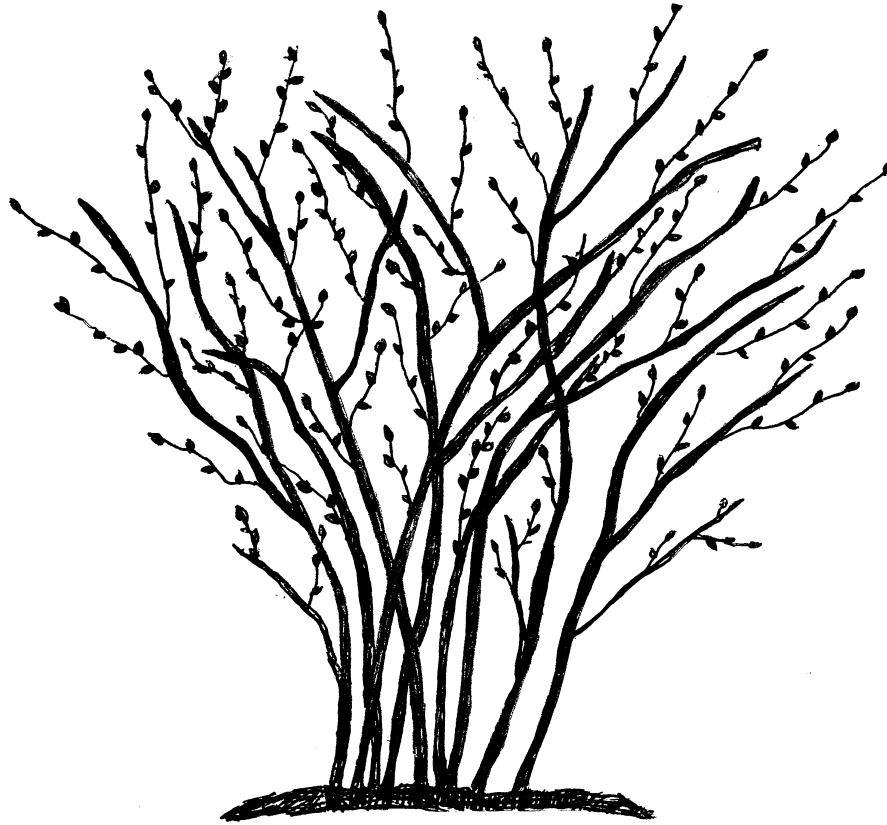


Figure 1. Blueberry bush that is not pruned.

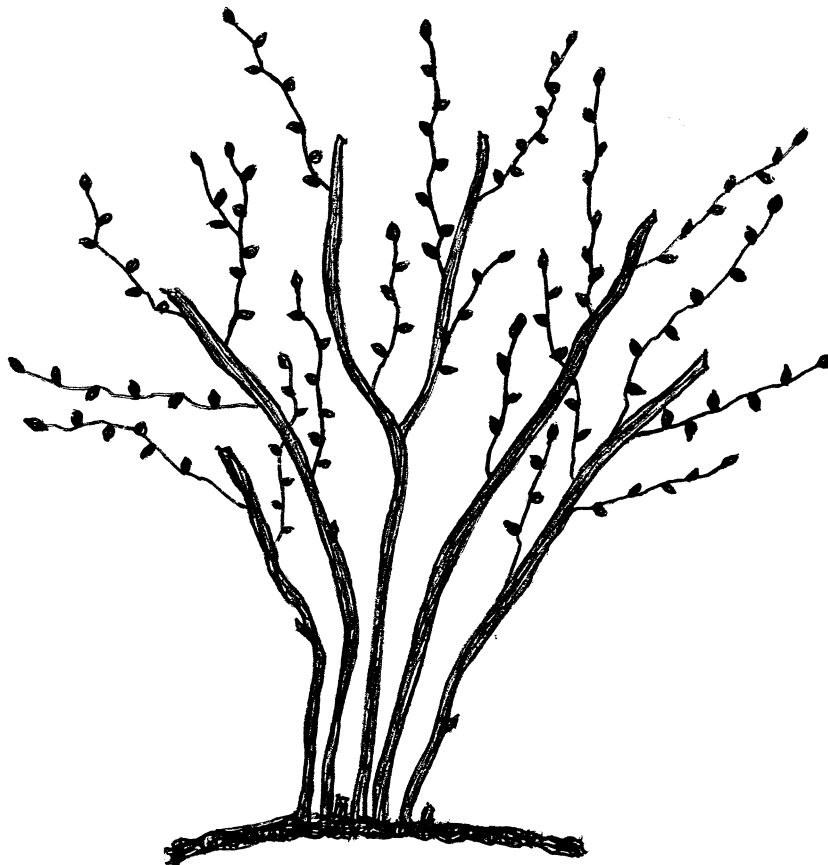


Figure 2. Blueberry bush that has been pruned.

ference in plant characteristics from one blueberry variety to another. Each variety may produce a different number of canes; 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 do not require as much pruning to remove undesirable vegetation. 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.

What are the tools used for pruning?

Hand tools such as loppers, hand pruners, and handsaws can be used to effectively remove all undesired wood from grapevines. 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.

Summary

Learning to master the art and science of pruning blueberries takes time and practice. Contact your county 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.

Glossary of Pruning Terms

Cane: A green summer shoot matures (hardens off) into a woody, brown one-year-old cane after leaf fall.

Fruiting wood: Wood that produces flower buds during the late summer.

Node: The thickened portion of a cane where a fruiting or vegetative bud is located.

Pruning: Removal of portions of the canes to help maintain size, shape, and productivity of the bush.

Shoot: The green, leafy growth that develops from the blueberry bush root crown.

Useful References

Ohio State University Extension Bulletin 591, *Growing and Using Fruits at Home*.

Ohio State University Extension Fact Sheet HYG-1422-98, "Growing Blueberries in the Home Garden" (<http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/1000/1422.html>).

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