

Growing Blueberries in the Backyard

By CARL TOTEMEIER

WHEN European explorers and settlers first set foot on North American soil, they found blueberries growing wild. Until 1906, wild blueberries were the sole source of this delectable fruit.

In that year, Dr. F. V. Coville, a plant scientist with the United States Department of Agriculture, discovered a plant with superior fruit growing in Greenfield, N. H., and named it Brooks. Attempts at self pollination to develop new varieties failed. However, a second plant with superior fruit was discovered in New Hampshire soon after and was named Russell. The two plants proved to be genetically compatible when crosses were obtained in 1911. This was the beginning of development of the cultivated blueberry we know today.

In searching out additional superior forms, Dr. Coville enlisted the cooperation of Elizabeth C. White of New Lisbon, N.J., who had an eye for detecting plants having desirable fruit. The breeding program that resulted from these efforts led to 68,000 seedlings of known parentage that were tested by the year 1936, when Dr. Coville died.

While several Coville varieties are still recommended today, continued breeding and evaluation by the Department of Agriculture have led to additional improvements in plant and fruit.

The blueberry that was the object of this work was the highbush blue-

berry of the east coast. While several other forms exist around the country, the highbush is the most widely grown. It is adapted to a region extending from the southern Appalachians and the Ozarks in the south to Michigan and New England on the north where conditions are suitable for blueberry culture. Commercial production of the highbush blueberry is mostly in southern New Jersey and Michigan.

In the deep south, the rabbiteye blueberry is better adapted to the warm climate. While it is produced on a limited scale commercially, the fruit is coarse-textured and gritty and inferior to that of the highbush. The northwest has the evergreen blueberry which is both collected and commercially grown.

But what of the home gardener who would like to grow blueberries. Is it feasible? The answer is yes, assuming that the cultural requirements can be met.

The blueberry is a member of the Ericaceous family of plants. These have one requirement in common — they must have acid soil to do well. A pH range of 4.0 to 5.5 is desirable. Where this is not available, it is possible to modify the acidity of the soil by using as much as 50 percent acid peat in the planting soil. On large-scale plantings, sulfur may be added to the soil to increase the acidity; on small plantings, three ounces of ammonium sulfate fertilizer per plant each year should do the job.

Yellow, off-color foliage is a sign of iron deficiency brought about by a soil that is not sufficiently acid. When



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such symptoms appear, iron chelate at the rate of one tablespoon per gallon of water should be applied to four to six small or two to four large plants to offset the deficiency. However, the soil should also be tested and ammonium sulfate applied to adjust the pH as required.

When a new blueberry plant is planted, it should be cut back about half way to encourage branching near its base and to facilitate new growth. Further pruning should not be required for three years when the plants have begun to produce fruits. Pruning of established bushes should be done on a yearly basis and should

consist of removing weak twigs and branches that are less than six inches long in the center of the plant and near its base. Mature plants will benefit from the removal of one or more of the older, less productive shoots to allow the development of new, vigorous growth.

Cultivated blueberry varieties are self sterile, as Coville discovered, so that two or more varieties are required in each planting for a good fruit crop. Since there are early, mid-season and late varieties, it is essential that those varieties planted bloom at the same time.

The New York State Fruit Testing Cooperative Association at Geneva, N.Y., 14456, lists the following varieties as being superior: early — earlblue, midseason — Collins, Blueray, Bluecrop and Berkley, late — Coville. For a membership fee of \$5, the association will send its catalogue listing blueberries and other superior new fruits adapted to the region.

In addition, commercial nurseries such as Raynor Bros. Inc., P.O. Box 1617, Salisbury, Md., 21801; J. E. Miller Nurseries Inc., Canandaigua, N.Y., 14424; Kelly Bros. Nurseries, Inc., Dansville, N.Y., 14437; Spring Hill Nurseries, Tipp City, Ohio, 45371, and Stark Bros. Nurseries, Louisiana, Mo., 63353, have catalogues.

One should also look to the better nursery garden center, which offers potted blueberry plants. The convenience of having plants when you want them and the better assurance of survival offset additional costs. ■

DO NOT FORGET THE NEEDIES!