

# Elmore Roots' Permaculture Tips

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## Growing Blueberries Successfully in the North

By David Fried

If you know where there are great patches of blueberries, enjoy them and share them with your friends.

Otherwise, why not plant your own “blueberry island”? You simply purchase some healthy bushes from your local nursery and plant them about four feet apart. In a year or two, you could be eating handfuls with abandon.

The blueberry was wild once. Fred Ashworth, a fruit explorer of upstate New York found some that fruited after being exposed to  $-50^{\circ}$  temperatures. He sent pieces of these plants to the University of Minnesota. They crossed these super-hardy ones with some large fruited “domestic” varieties resulting in new ultra hardy plants, called Northcountry, Northblue, Polaris, Chippewa and Bluegold, that produce abundant fruit.

We have been growing these cultivars in Elmore, Vermont for about 35 years with great success. Visitors' jaws drop when they see how our blueberry bushes are loaded—and we make sure they fill their mouths while they are here.

We harvest from July thru August under the bird netting that is over a frame. This not only keeps the birds off, but also helps to assure full ripening to their utmost sweetness. The netting keeps the pressure off of us for picking them before the birds do and thus allows them to ripen fully.

In spring the 2 ½ – 4 foot bushes are a myriad of bell shaped blossoms, where the bumblebees do the mambo in and out of the flowers. In summer you can barely see the bushes because they are so heavy with fruit. In fall, the plants turn into a sea of deep red, harmonizing with the maple trees in the hedgerow. In winter, they sleep, and our blueberry island is but a dream.

In the permaculture inspired design of our farm, the blueberry patch is close to the sun porch and picnic areas. Everyone will take handfuls as they go to and from the office and the fields. This closeness also assures that bears don't come too close and that if a bird wanders into the net, we can release him because we are near enough often enough to notice. Because they require little care or spraying, they are also a good candidate for being near a home lawn or kids' play area.

An old-timer who was a very good blueberry grower once said to me, “there are three things that are important for successful blueberries: pH, pH, and pH!” Much of Vermont has an acid soil. Adding pine needles or some elemental sulfur around the bushes will bring the pH to a comfortable 4.5 to 5. They also like a lot of organic matter, sunshine and not many weeds around them until they are established.

Blueberries are very healthful, rating right up there with blackberries and aroniaberries — testimony to the many vitamins and nutraceuticals you can grow in your own back yard.

Actually, they are tasty and attractive enough to plant them in your front yard, too. “Blueberry fields forever....”

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Painting by Gabriel Tempesta