

you should also begin a weed control program in preparation for planting blueberries. Weed control is very difficult in blueberries for the first 2 years after planting, and everything possible should be done before planting to reduce later problems. Bahiagrass, bermudagrass, and other aggressive perennial grasses should be eliminated by spraying with glyphosate in September before winter planting. In old fields, weeds should be repeatedly destroyed before maturity for one full year prior to planting blueberries in order to reduce the population of weed seeds.

Irrigation

Provision should be made for irrigating blueberries in Florida. On moist soils with good water-holding capacity blueberries could be grown without irrigation, but the risk of plant loss during establishment years and crop reduction in subsequent years makes this inadvisable. Drip irrigation, sprinkler irrigation, and overhead irrigation are three types that can be used. Drip systems have been the most popular with Florida growers because of lower installation costs and more efficient placement of water which reduces the amount of water that must be added. A reason for minimizing the amount of water applied, aside from pumping costs, is that most Florida groundwater has a pH above 7.0 and contains dissolved calcium carbonate which raises the pH of the soil if added in large amounts. The irrigation system should be installed before planting. Blueberries should be irrigated with discretion. Rainfall, soil type, plant age, and season of the year should be considered when deciding whether or not to turn on the irrigation. In wet years, irrigation may not be needed at all. Newly-set plants have the most critical water needs: they are most sensitive to overwatering and underwatering. Too much water is as damaging as too little. In dry years, irrigation is important on fruiting plants during the fruit development period. Dry weather during this period followed by heavy rains during ripening can result in much fruit loss due to split berries. This problem can be minimized by irrigation during dry periods in the spring and early summer.

Planting the Blueberries

Rabbiteye blueberries should be planted in rows 12 feet apart with no more than 6 feet between plants within rows. This requires 604 plants per acre. Higher yields per acre could be obtained in

years 4, 5, and 6 by reducing within row plant space to 3 feet, but this would double the cost of plants. Eventually plants will sprout enough suckers to form a continuous hedge down the row. Plant rows should be thoroughly disced before planting. Rows should be run so as to facilitate drainage if drainage is a problem.

December is the best month for planting blueberries in Florida. January and February are also acceptable, but give plants less time to establish roots before spring growth begins. Vigorous two-year-old plants are best for setting in the field. Small plants are harder to protect from weeds, and older plants suffer more transplanting shock. Two-year old plants have been grown for one year in a field nursery following propagation. If plants grown in pots are set in the field, it is important to break up the root ball with several vertical slashes of a knife. In transplanting blueberries, care should always be taken to prevent the roots from drying out.

Several studies have shown that burying a gallon of moist acid peat moss beneath each plant at the time of planting will result in faster plant growth. Sawdust and wood chips should not be used in this way because they take nitrogen from the soil as they decay. If the planting is made on good blueberry soil, burying peat moss is not essential, and the cost of the operation may exceed its benefits. If peat moss is used, a 2-gallon hole should be dug for the plant. One gallon of topsoil should be mixed with 1 gallon of moist peat moss and this mix should be placed under and around the plant's roots as it is planted. Another way of applying peat moss is to spread it in the planting row and mix it with the soil by use of a rototiller. The peat-soil mixture is then placed around the blueberry roots when the planting hole is refilled. Never put fertilizer in the hole at the time of planting. Blueberries should be pruned when transplanted to remove 50% of the top. All flower buds should be removed in this pruning.

Mulching

Mulching blueberries is expensive in Florida but highly beneficial. Mulch helps control weeds and helps to keep the soil moist and cool. Pine bark and pine straw make the best mulches. Wood chips and rotten sawdust are satisfactory but fresh sawdust should be avoided. A good mulch is 4 to 6 inches deep and covers a band 4 feet wide centered on and running continuously down the plant row. An alternative which requires less mulch is to mulch only the area within a circle two feet around each plant.