

The Alternative Kitchen Garden

Episode 64 transcript



Hello, and welcome to episode 64 of the Alternative Kitchen Garden. I'm Emma and today, after a week off, I'm going to be talking about blueberries. Blueberries have been in the press a lot in recent years because they're a superfood – their high antioxidant level means that they're super healthy. They've been surpassed, in recent times, by more exotic things like the acai berry, the goji berry (and now I hear there's a new one called the Yumberry), but that doesn't mean that they're not a superfood, so blueberries are really good for you. However, they're also fiendishly expensive. Certainly here in the UK if you want to buy them in the supermarket they're very expensive, as and when they're available. So if you want to gorge yourself on blueberries then it may well be worth growing your own.

If you plant a bush now it will be a couple of years before you get a decent harvest, but they are very low maintenance plants so it may well be worth thinking about.

The one thing you need to remember about blueberries is that they don't like calcium. They are acid-loving plants, also known as ericaceous and lime-hating, so if you don't have acid soil in your garden (and that's soil with a low pH) then you'll need to think about growing blueberries in containers and giving them ericaceous soil or compost. You're aiming for a pH of between about 4.0 and 5.0, and if you live in an area that has alkaline soil (like I do) then you'll almost certainly have alkaline tap water as well. So if you haven't already invested in a water butt for your garden, and you want to grow blueberries, you really ought to get a water butt because you'll only be able to water them with rainwater. Otherwise you risk raising the pH in their compost and making them very unhappy. If you want to know all about water-wise gardening and water butts, you should go back and listen to episode 14 of the show, which was roughly this time last year, when I was talking about water-wise gardening, and I'll put the link to that in the show notes for you.

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As I said, if you don't have the right soil you can grow your blueberries in containers, and that's how I grow mine. They'll need a pot which is about 30-40 cm (I think I worked out that's about 12-15 inches) in diameter. Eventually they might need upsizing a little bit, but they're not the world's largest plants. If you're planting them in the soil they need to be about 1.5 m (that's 5 feet) apart. That sounds like a lot to me but apparently that's the recommended spacing.

They are self-fertile, so you can have one blueberry plant. However, if you can plant more than one variety then that will help with pollination and you'll get bigger harvests. And different varieties crop at slightly different times, so if you get two different varieties that crop at slightly different times you'll extend your blueberry season as well.

Plants take about 3 years to fruit, and in that time you don't want to be pruning them at all so in the first 3 years they're very, very low maintenance plants. You just water them and look after them, and you don't need to prune them. After that you'll be pruning them in the winter when the plant is dormant, because they're deciduous plants. And you will simply be removing dead and diseased wood. Once your bush is several years old then you can start removing wood that's over 4 years old as well, but for a few years there's very little pruning to be done and it's not scary.

Blueberries have very few pest and disease problems. However, the birds in your garden will love your blueberries and they will pick them before they're ripe enough for you to eat. And so if you want to eat any of them yourself (and this is something I'm not very good at yet!) you will need to net your plants – pretty much from the time the first fruits start appearing, because the birds will think they're ripe long before you do. And, as with any fruit, if you are netting fruit or any other sorts of plants you need to make sure that a) the birds can't get in underneath the netting and b) you check the netting every day to make sure that no birds have managed to get inside and got trapped. You need to be very careful with netting to make sure that you're not trapping any birds and animals in there with your plants.

Your blueberry harvest will be in mid to late summer. The berries will change colour and they will become a deep mauve with a grey bloom on them. They don't all ripen at once, so keep checking your plants (every couple of days, at least) for ripe berries, and don't wash them until you're about to eat them. This is assuming that any of them make it as far as the kitchen! But you shouldn't wash them until you're ready to eat them or cook with them.

If your plants develop yellow leaves, that's a sign that they've got an iron deficiency and that the pH in their soil is too high. At that point you need to take some action to lower the pH. Sulphur chips are a good way of doing that – you apply them and they lower the pH over the fairly long term. Amending soil pH is a big job in the garden, which is why if you want to grow ericaceous plants and you don't have acid soil you should grow them in containers. It's a much easier job in containers.

Your bushes won't require any support, but they will appreciate being mulched (preferably with composted bark or pine needles). If you add any compost to the soil

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>



make sure you check the pH first, with a pH meter or one of those soil chemistry kits, to make sure that you're not raising the pH, which they really won't love.

What they do love is being in damp soil, so get that rain water butt up and running and give them plenty of water. They won't like being waterlogged, but they do like being continuously damp. And if you don't keep them continuously damp then what will happen is that the plants will look OK for the time being, but the next year they will look very sad. I had this happen to my first 2 blueberries, they're both mostly dead now, but in a dry year you will be constantly watering them to keep them healthy.

You should feed your blueberry bushes, especially if they're in containers, with a balanced ericaceous feed – so one suitable for acid-loving plants – in early spring and late summer. You're aiming to feed before they flower. You can get two flushes of fruits from a blueberry, so you feed them twice during the year. And that's pretty much it in the maintenance stakes.

In the autumn you can sit back and watch as their foliage turns a glorious red colour and then drops away. And apart from the minor pruning which I mentioned before, that's pretty much all you need to do for them.

If you want to get a bit more from your space then you can under plant your blueberries with cranberries, another acid-loving berry, and the plants will take a couple of years to come into harvest, but after that you'll be harvesting them for years to come. Most fruit bushes are a bit of an investment. You buy them young and they mature in your garden and you get heavy crops a few years hence. But it's well worth doing, especially if – as with blueberries - you're planting them in containers, and if you're thinking about moving you can take them with you, so that's not an issue.

If you want something a little bit more exotic then you can look for the wilder versions of blueberries and cranberries. In the UK you can get bilberries and cowberries. They were in the Wiggly Wiggles catalogue last year, but I've checked on their website this morning and they're not available from them this year, but if you hunt around in various nurseries then you may be able to find something a little bit more... well, a little bit **less** exotic I suppose, a little bit more native to your area that you might find easier to grow in your climate. It depends on your tastes. If you're a blueberry fan or a cranberry fan, then grow the commercial varieties. If you want something a little bit more unusual then hunt down your native plants.

In theory, growing blueberries and cranberries is very easy, even if you have to grow them in containers because of your soil. In practice it can be a little bit more problematic. As I say, I have had 2 blueberry bushes die on me because I didn't look after them properly. I have 4 new ones, and last year I was much more regular with the watering (although I didn't need to be because it was a wet summer!) but I also bought some sulphur chips and made sure that their soil had the right pH as well. So you do need to keep an eye on them. They are low maintenance, but they do need occasional checks to make sure that they're happy, and you need to keep up with that because although they might look happy they don't come back very well after the

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>



winter if they weren't happy this year. If you're lucky enough to have acid soil and you can just plant them in the garden, and you live in a wet area, then they're absolutely trouble-free and you should grow lots and lots of them and share them with your friends.

Anyway, that's it from me this week. If you've got any comments or questions then do drop me an email to akgpodcast@gmail.com, or leave me a comment on the show homepage (which is <http://coopette.com/akg>) or you can join in the Facebook discussions. I'd love to hear about your superfood growing exploits, your blueberries, your cranberries, anything else you want to tell me about – do get in touch. In the meantime, have a great week in your garden. Goodbye!

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