

Rabbiteye Blueberries

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Rabbiteye blueberries are attractive landscaping plants, and the berries also make a delicious snack. Left: Rabbiteye blueberries used as a barrier hedge. Right: Rabbiteye blueberries have bell-shaped flowers.

Summary

Rabbiteye blueberry (*Vaccinium virgatum* or *V. ashei*) is a deciduous shrub native to the southeastern United States. The name rabbiteye comes from the pink color of the fruit prior to ripening into a lush blue, a color that resembles the eye color of an albino rabbit. Rabbiteye blueberries provide excellent aesthetic value for Louisiana landscapes because of the pink-and-blue fruit, the blue-green foliage that turns red and orange in the fall and the white bell-shaped flowers in the spring. Rabbiteye blueberries make a great addition to edible landscapes as the berries are delicious and are packed with vitamins and nutrients. Rabbiteye blueberries also provide ecosystem services to the landscape in the form of attracting pollinators and birds throughout the spring and summer.

Requirements

- Requires acidic soil. Soil pH 4.2 to 5.5 is recommended.
- Full sun throughout the day will help produce the best harvest.
- Rabbiteye blueberries are shallow-rooted and need well-drained soils. Raised beds are often optimal and can be necessary in areas with heavy soils. If unsure about the soil drainage of a potential area, 2 to 4 inches of aged pine bark can be blended into the soil, and the planting area can be mounded into a bed that is 6 to 10 inches high.
- Rabbiteye blueberries produce best through cross-pollination. It is recommended that at least two to three varieties should be planted together to provide adequate pollination and extend the harvest season.

Growth Habit

- Can grow 8 feet tall and up to 6 feet wide.
- Can be grown as a hedge or feature shrub in landscapes. Can also be grown in containers.
- Plant shrubs 6 to 4 feet apart in the fall or winter, when plants are dormant.
- Hardiness zones 8–10. Remember to choose a variety that has a chilling requirement compatible with your location. The southernmost areas of Louisiana may not get enough chill hours for consistent fruit production in all varieties.

Care and Maintenance

- Ensure proper moisture, especially during drought periods. If possible, drip irrigation is recommended for sandy soils.
- Apply 3 to 4 inches of mulch within a 3- to 5-foot radius of the base.
- Rabbit-eye blueberries are susceptible to overfertilization, especially young plants. Fertilizer applications should be divided into multiple applications each year and applied at low rates. Avoid nitrate fertilizers. Ammonium forms of nitrogen are desirable. Complete fertilizers for acid-loving plants, such as azaleas, are also viable.
- Plants can bear well with little to no pruning, but some pruning may be desirable to keep the fruit within easy reach and to encourage new growth. To reduce the height of a bush, trim it immediately after harvest so that there will be time for new growth to set fruit

buds for the following year. Prune dead branches in late winter to early spring, and thin lower limbs to keep fruit off the ground. On older plants, it is acceptable to cut out approximately one-fifth of the oldest canes (trunks) each year.

- Fruit will ripen over a four- to six-week period. Fruit do not ripen all at the same time, so harvest can occur for multiple weeks. Fruit harvested too early will be bitter.
- Well-maintained, mature rabbit-eye blueberry bushes can be expected to yield more than 10 pounds per bush. However, yields of over 30 pounds per bush are possible.
- Providing adequate drainage will help prevent problems with *Phytophthora* root rot.
- The youngest leaves of blueberry plants sometimes appear yellow because of iron deficiency, which occurs when the soil pH is too high. If the leaves near the ends of branches are yellow, check the soil pH and acidify the soil if higher than pH 6.0.

Varieties for Louisiana Landscapes

Traditional varieties like Premier, Climax, Brightwell, Tifblue, Delight and Powderblue remain well-suited to most areas of Louisiana. There are more recently released varieties like Alapaha, Ira, Onslow, Ochlockonee and DeSoto that are likely to perform well but have not been formally evaluated in Louisiana. (Varieties are listed in approximate order of ripening.) Prince, which has one of the lowest chill hour requirements among rabbit-eye varieties and produces fruit early in the season, might also be considered for southern Louisiana locations.

For more information on rabbit-eye blueberries and other Louisiana Super Plants, contact your local LSU AgCenter extension office or visit lsuagcenter.com/superplants.



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