



How to Grow Blueberries

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Pots, acid soil and pruning made simple




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How to Grow Blueberries in the UK: Pots, Pruning, Care

To grow blueberries in the UK you need one thing above all: acid soil, with a pH between 4.5 and 5.5. Most British gardens do not have it, which is why the most reliable way to grow blueberries here is in a large pot of ericaceous compost, watered with rainwater rather than tap water. Plant between autumn and spring, grow two different varieties for bigger crops, and prune only lightly for the first few years.

That is the whole game in four sentences, and the acid soil part is the one to tattoo somewhere. I learned it the expensive way in Oxfordshire, where my soil sits on limestone. My first blueberry went into the border with a bucket of ericaceous compost in the planting hole, looked fine for a season, then slowly yellowed and sulked for two years as the surrounding lime crept back in. The two bushes I moved into big pots the next spring have cropped generously ever since. Here is everything I wish I had known at the start.

The Acid Soil Rule

Blueberries evolved on acidic heathland and bogs, and their roots simply cannot take up iron and other nutrients in neutral or alkaline soil. Plant them in ordinary garden soil and you get a slow decline: yellowing leaves with green veins, little new growth, a few disappointing berries. No amount of feeding fixes it, because the problem is not a lack of nutrients but a pH that locks them away.

So before anything else, find out what you are working with. A cheap pH testing kit settles it in ten minutes, and my guide to telling what soil type you have covers the broader picture. A useful shortcut is to look at the neighbours' gardens: rhododendrons, camellias and heathers thriving along your street mean you can probably plant in the ground, while lavender and clematis everywhere and no rhododendrons means neutral to alkaline soil, and pots are your route. Most of England, especially anywhere on chalk or limestone, is in the second camp.

Growing Blueberries in Pots



A big pot of ericaceous compost gives total control over the acidity blueberries insist on.

For most UK gardeners, pots are not the fallback option, they are the best option, because a pot gives you total control over the one thing blueberries insist on. Choose a container at least 45cm to 50cm wide and deep for a mature bush, with good drainage holes, and fill it with ericaceous compost, which is simply compost formulated to be acidic. Nothing else about the job is difficult.

Start a young plant in a 30cm pot and move it up a size every year or two rather than dropping it straight into a huge container, where the unused compost can turn sour. Refresh the top few centimetres of compost every couple of years, and repot completely with fresh ericaceous compost every three to four. A bush in a half barrel, with white spring flowers, summer fruit and flame-red autumn leaves, is also one of the few fruits that earns its patio place as an ornamental.

When to Plant Blueberries in the UK

The best time to plant blueberries in the UK is between autumn and early spring, from roughly October to March, while the plant is dormant. Autumn planting gives the roots the longest run to establish before their first summer, which matters for a shallow-rooted plant that hates drying out. Container-grown blueberries, which is how almost all are sold here, can technically go in at any time of year, but a plant put in during a hot July needs constant watering to survive its first months

Buy two-year-old or three-year-old plants if you can, as they establish faster and reach cropping age sooner. Blueberries are a patience game either way: expect a token handful of berries in the first year or two and a proper crop from year three or four. Slow start, but a well-treated bush then crops for decades.

Plant Two Varieties, Not One

Most blueberry varieties are described as self-fertile, and technically they are, but a single bush gives you a fraction of what it could.

Two different varieties flowering at the same time cross-pollinate into noticeably heavier crops of larger berries, provided there are enough bees about to do the moving, which is where bee friendly plants earn their keep. If you have room for two pots, this is the cheapest way to double your harvest.

Choosing varieties by ripening time also stretches the season. An early variety such as 'Duke', a midseason one like 'Bluecrop', which is the reliable workhorse of UK gardens, and a late one such as 'Chandler', famous for berries the size of ten pence pieces, will give you picking from early July into September. For smaller pots on a patio, compact varieties bred for containers stay under a metre. The Royal Horticultural Society keeps a current list of recommended varieties on its blueberries grow-your-own page.

Water With Rainwater, Not Tap Water



Rainwater from a butt keeps the compost acidic where hard tap water slowly undoes it.

This is the detail that quietly kills more potted blueberries than anything else. In most of the UK, tap water is hard, meaning it carries dissolved lime, and every can of it gradually neutralises the acidity of your carefully chosen ericaceous compost. Water a blueberry with hard tap water for a couple of years and you have slowly undone the entire point of the pot.

The answer is rainwater, so if you do not have a water butt, this is the year to fit one. Blueberries are shallow-rooted and thirsty, and a pot in a hot spell may need water daily. If the butt runs dry in a drought, a few weeks of tap water is far better than letting the plant desiccate, just switch back when the rain returns. The wider principles are in how often to water plants in the UK. Keep the compost consistently moist but never waterlogged, because for all their bog ancestry, potted blueberries still need drainage.

Feeding and Everyday Care

Feed blueberries with an ericaceous fertiliser, sold for rhododendrons and camellias, following the pack rate from early spring to midsummer. Do not use ordinary general fertilisers or mushroom compost, and never lime anywhere near them. Go gently, because blueberries are light feeders and overfeeding scorches their fine roots; half strength is a sensible starting point for pots.

Mulch plants in the ground with acidic material such as pine needles, bark or leaf mould to hold moisture and keep the pH down, and keep the area around the shallow roots weeded by hand rather than hoed. Beyond that, care is genuinely light, as blueberries suffer few pests and diseases in the UK.

How to Prune Blueberries in the UK



Take one or two of the oldest stems out at the base each year to keep the bush renewing.

Blueberry bush pruning is where most growers either do too much too soon or nothing at all for a decade, and both cost you fruit. The golden rule for a young bush is to barely prune at all. For the first two to three years, just remove anything dead, damaged or crossing, and any weak twiggy growth low on the plant, and otherwise let it build its framework. Blueberries fruit mostly on the strong shoots made the previous year, so every healthy young stem you cut off is a punnet you will not pick.

From about year four, prune once a year while the plant is dormant, in late February or early March, when the fat rounded fruit buds are easy to tell from the slim pointed leaf buds. Take out one or two of the oldest, darkest stems at the base each year to keep the bush renewing itself, then clear dead wood, low branches and thin twiggy clutter from the centre so light and air get in, aiming for an open goblet of five to eight strong stems of mixed 7 ages.

Done annually it takes ten minutes a bush, and it is the difference between an old bush that crops like a young one and a thicket of grey wood with a few sour berries at the tips. BBC Gardeners' World has a clear step-by-step in their blueberry pruning guide if you want pictures alongside.

Harvesting Blueberries



Deep blue with a soft grey bloom, and netted before the blackbirds arrive.

Blueberries ripen from July to September depending on variety, and here is the bit that surprises people: a blueberry that has just turned blue is not ripe. Leave each berry several days after it colours, until it is deep blue with a soft grey bloom and comes away with the gentlest roll between finger and thumb. That extra wait turns a sharp berry into something sweet and aromatic that supermarket fruit, picked early to travel, never manages. Berries on one cluster ripen at different times, so pick over the bush every few days rather than stripping it.

The birds know all this too, and blackbirds will clear a bush the week it ripens. Netting is not optional if you want a crop, so drape a fine net over the bush as the first berries colour, or pick up a fruit cage if you grow several. Any surplus freezes brilliantly, spread on a tray first so the berries stay separate.

Common Blueberry Problems

Yellow leaves with green veins. The classic sign the pH has crept too high, usually from tap water or the wrong compost. Test, switch to rainwater, feed with ericaceous fertiliser, and refresh the compost.

Plenty of flowers, few berries. Usually a pollination shortfall from growing a single variety. Add a second variety that flowers at the same time.

No flowers at all. Overpruning a young bush, too much shade, or high-nitrogen feed pushing leaf instead of fruit bud.

Berries stripped overnight. Birds, almost always blackbirds. Net before the berries colour, not after.

Bush collapsing in a wet winter. Waterlogged roots. Improve drainage, raise pots on feet, and see my guide to dealing with a waterlogged garden.

Common Questions About Growing Blueberries

How do you grow blueberries in the UK?

Grow blueberries in acid soil with a pH of 4.5 to 5.5, which for most UK gardens means a large pot of ericaceous compost in a sunny spot. Plant between autumn and spring, grow two different varieties for better pollination, water with rainwater rather than hard tap water, feed lightly with an ericaceous fertiliser, and prune only lightly for the first few years.

Can you grow blueberries in pots in the UK?

Yes, and for most UK gardens pots are the best way, because they let you give the plant the acidic conditions it must have regardless of your garden soil. Use a container at least 45cm wide and deep for a mature bush, fill it with ericaceous compost, water with rainwater, and repot with fresh compost every three to four years.

When should you plant blueberries in the UK?

The best time to plant blueberries in the UK is while they are dormant, from roughly October to March, with autumn ideal because the roots establish before the first summer. Container-grown plants can go in at other times of year but need very regular watering through their first summer.

Why do blueberries need acid soil?

Blueberry roots can only take up iron and certain other nutrients when the soil pH is between about 4.5 and 5.5. In neutral or alkaline soil those nutrients become chemically locked away, and the plant yellows and slowly declines no matter how much you feed it. That is why growers on ordinary soil use pots of ericaceous compost.

How do you prune a blueberry bush in the UK?

Barely prune for the first two to three years beyond removing dead, damaged or crossing growth. From year four, prune annually in late winter, around late February to March: cut one or two of the oldest, darkest stems out at the base, then remove dead wood and thin twiggy growth from the centre, aiming for an open bush of five to eight strong stems of mixed ages.

Why should you water blueberries with rainwater?

Tap water in most of the UK is hard, containing dissolved lime that gradually neutralises the acidity blueberries depend on, especially in pots. Rainwater is naturally soft and slightly acidic, so watering from a water butt keeps the compost at the right pH. In a drought, short spells of tap water are better than letting the plant dry out.

Do you need two blueberry bushes to get fruit?

Most varieties are self-fertile, so one bush will produce some fruit, but two different varieties flowering at the same time cross-pollinate and give noticeably heavier crops of larger berries. If you have space for two pots, growing two varieties is the easiest way to increase your harvest.

How long does a blueberry bush take to fruit?

Expect a token handful of berries in the first year or two and a worthwhile crop from year three or four, with plants reaching full production at around five to six years. It is a slow start, but a well-cared-for bush then crops reliably for decades.

A Sensible Place to Start

Keep the first year simple. Buy two different two-year-old varieties this autumn or winter, say 'Duke' and 'Bluecrop', and plant each in a 30cm to 40cm pot of ericaceous compost in a sunny spot. Fit a water butt if you do not have one, water with rainwater, feed lightly with an ericaceous feed in spring, and do not prune anything except dead or damaged wood. Net the bushes the moment the first berries colour..

How to Contact the Editor

If you have comments or you know I have given wrong advice then please contact me by email at

info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

If you have something to contribute or have a say on allotment life, then please use my email to send your contributions.

I am going to process the magazine issue once a month, so if there are comments you would like to make they can be answered in future editions.

I would like to add that most of the articles are taken off the web and some well known gardening and allotments magazines have been read in the making of our magazine content.

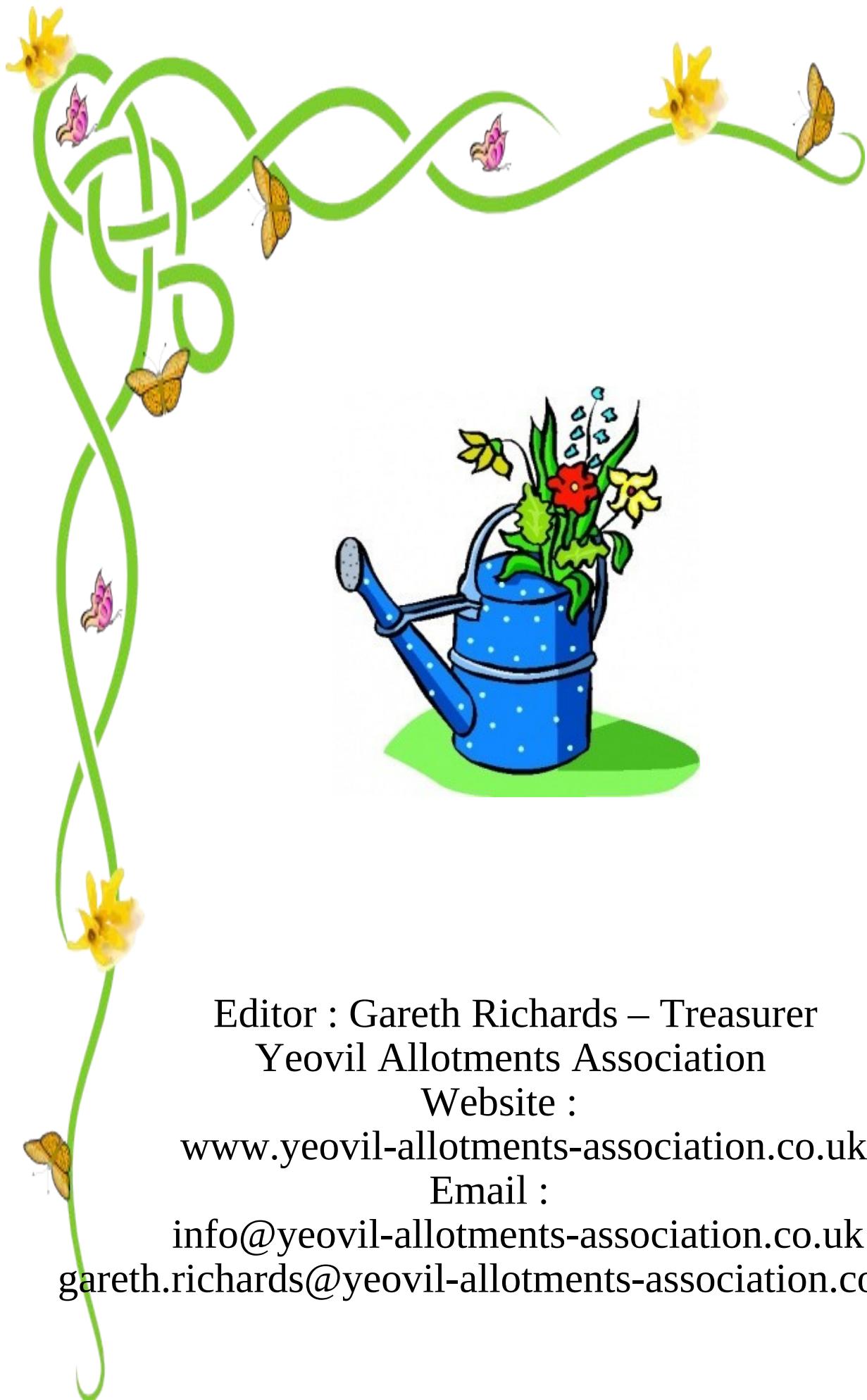
We also have our own website at :

www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

where you can find this magazine as well as a catalogue

Happy Allotmenting and best wishes,

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