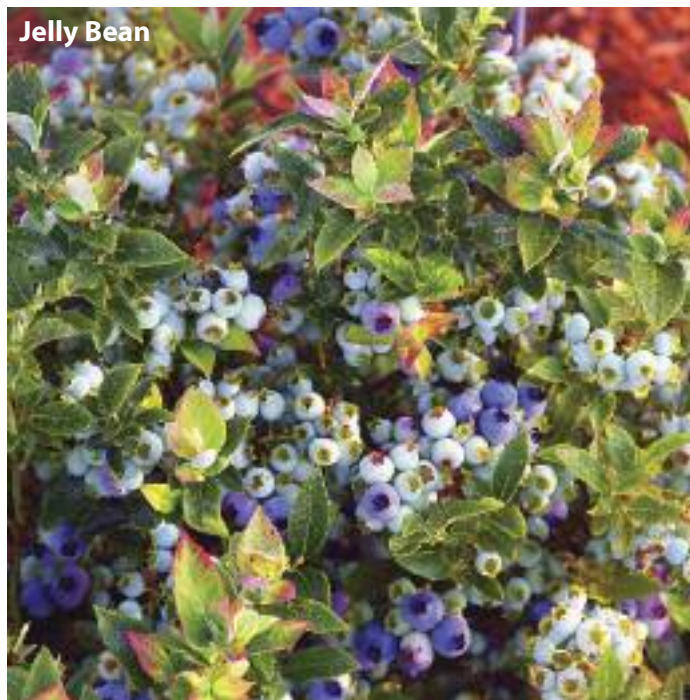




Perpetua

Photo / Star® Roses and Plants



Jelly Bean

Photo / Monrovia

The New Blueberries – Plants for All Seasons

By Stephanie Cohen

Whether you call them edibles, ornamentals or just shrubs, I call them plants for all seasons. Blueberries are a native plant. I'm sure the Native Americans munched on their delicious fruits, pioneers probably savored them, and children who found wild blueberries near their homes were overjoyed.

By the early 1900s Dr. Frederick Coville, a USDA botanist, had discovered the secret to domesticating blueberries. (They require acidic soil.) Along with Elizabeth White, the daughter of a cranberry grower in New Jersey, they worked out how to take the plants from the wild and breed them to make the delicious treat we enjoy today.

By 1916, they sold their first crop in Whitesbog, NJ. The rest is history until the 1990s when the health benefits of the blueberry became known, particularly its antioxidant qualities. It's hard to believe that, barely 100 years later, more than 1 billion blueberries are sold on five continents ... and that number is constantly increasing. All of a sudden there's a plethora of blueberry and raspberry plants just for the home gardener.

Bushel and Berry

I discovered my first plant from the *Bushel and Berry* collection (formerly called *Brazel Berries*) when a friend, Sharee Solow, a top-notch landscape designer, started screaming in my ear at the big trade show in Baltimore called MANTS (Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show).

The Bushel and Berry collection has five blueberries: Blueberry Glaze, Jelly Bean, Peach Sorbet, Perpetua and Pink Icing. There is also a blackberry (Baby Cakes) and a raspberry (Raspberry Shortcake).

From her expression, I thought she'd found the holy grail of flowers. It wasn't a flower, in fact, but a blueberry bush. Thinking her exuberance was over the top, I went to see it.

My jaw dropped when their many possible uses flashed through my mind. I thought containers, window boxes, hedges, small borders and herb gardens, in a mixed perennial border, and I felt like the children who, at Christmas, had visions of sugarplums dancing in their heads, except mine were blueberries.

Truly real *plant lust* had filled my brain. I talked to the sales people selling the plants because they only sell wholesale. I cajoled, flattered, and promised

them I'd promote them after I trialed the plant for a year. I think they said yes only because I was unrelenting. That spring I got some blueberry bushes and boy was I excited.

They not only met my expectations, but also exceeded them. The first plant I trialed was 'Peach Sorbet' which seemed like an odd name for a blueberry. Not so because, in the spring, the new growth on the leaves ranged from a luscious pink to peach to then turning a lovely dark bluish green. The white bell-shaped flowers emerged in the spring.

I began anticipating my first crop of fruit. By mid-summer, I began to see medium-size blueberries beginning to form. As I tasted my first several sweet blueberries, I knew I was going to have to share them with the birds. I think they would have gotten them before me, as I am a semi-late morning riser.

If you don't want to share, think about bird netting. By late fall or early winter the foliage color on this blueberry turned a luxurious red color with an eggplant overtone. It is quite dramatic and is hardy in zones 5 to 10.

The aspect of the blueberries that makes them unique is their size, as most don't exceed 3 feet. A few made it to 4 feet. They are short but mighty.

My favorite short one is 'Jelly Bean' which is perfect for a pot. It tastes like blueberry jelly and is just one compact mound. It has unusual elongate green leaves that have red highlights in cooler climates. Don't be fooled by the diminutive size because it still has a nice size blueberry. It is only 1 to 2 feet tall and is hardy in zones 4 to 8.

'Blueberry Glaze' is another story. An upright blueberry that could easily be substituted for a small, upright boxwood and can even be sheared since it's only 2 to 3 feet tall. It has nice glossy green leaves and smaller black berries that almost mimic a wild blueberry.

The leaves in fall are a mix of burgundy and green. This could even be mixed into a foundation planting. It's hardy in zones 5 to 8.

I call 'Perpetua' the more bang-for-your-buck blueberry. You get berries in mid-summer and a second smaller crop in fall. This is a definite plus for blueberry addicts.

The leaves differ in that they are not only shiny but curly, giving them a twisted appearance. The fall color is red and green, but here's the other perk; the new canes in winter are yellow and red. The berries are small, sweet and delicious. 'Perpetua' has an upright habit and is hardy in zones 4 to 8.

'Pink Icing' is the tallest of this batch at 3 to 4 feet. The new growth is one of its delights as the foliage emerges pink, blue and deep green. The leaves turn iridescent turquoise blue in winter. Plant several for a dramatic effect. It produces nice sweet berries.

It's Good To Have Options

There are other delicious varieties on the market sold by other companies. Check with your local garden center or extension service to get the best choices for your area.

Other blueberry cultivars you may want to consider include 'North Blue,' 'Sunshine Blue,' 'Northsky,' 'Top Hat,' 'Polaris' and 'Chippewa.' The selection keeps getting bigger as more gardeners realize the varied uses of these plants.

Let's Get Growing

Now let's get to the nitty gritty of growing them! Most blueberries do best in an acidic soil with a pH of 4.5-5.5. If your pH balance is too high you can add peat moss (or sulfur) to the soil to increase acidity. That's why growing them in containers is so easy.

Usually, I recommend growing them in containers 16 inches in diameter or more to allow the plant and its roots to reach optimum size. If you are planning to plant it with other plants, give them even more room.

It's vital to remember that patio pots can dry out quickly on very warm summer days. A must for containers is good drainage and remember to water until you see it coming out the drainage holes.

Fertilize your blueberry plants each spring with acid fertilizer, either liquid or granular. Gardeners should not use manure unless it is aged as it can burn the roots. Spent coffee grounds in spring wake up your plants. Caffeine works for plants as well as people. It gives them a jolt! They love it!

Many of the newer plants are

self-pollinating so sex isn't necessary. You don't need two. However, more plants usually ensure better pollination.

As far as water, blueberries like it on the moist side in the ground or in raised beds. Once or twice a week should do unless we get caught in a drought. Containers should be watered more often.

In winter the only care is to mulch in colder regions. If you have them in a container you can move it to a sheltered location against your house or hidden among evergreens.

Come spring, prune dead wood or non-fruiting wood to encourage the new young canes to grow faster and increase berry production. This should take only 5 to 10 minutes per plant. My kind of pruning, I love fast and easy.

All of the small new edible plants being produced for gardeners such as raspberries and blackberries are making it easier for gardeners to enjoy the luxury of fresh fruit whether you live in the city or the suburbs.

Nothing beats walking outside to your balcony or patio and enjoying fresh fruit that is not only delicious, but extremely healthy. The joy of having easy care plants is undeniable. ❁

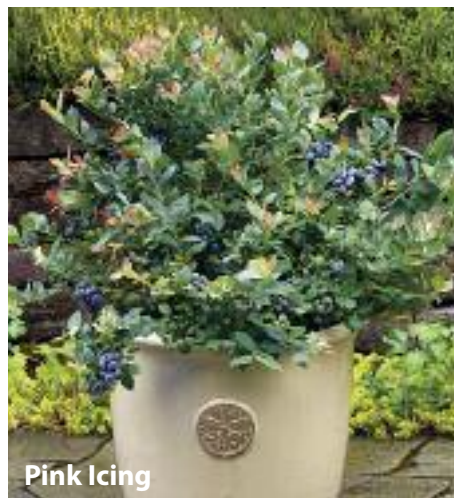
Stephanie Cohen (theperennialdiva.com), is the author of three gardening books. She has won a number of awards, including design awards. She is a contributing editor at Fine Gardening.



Stephanie Cohen



Blueberry Glaze



Pink Icing



Peach Sorbet

Photos / Star® Roses and Plants

Photo courtesy of Bushel and Berry