

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

My berry best friend is blue

BY SIOUX ROGERS



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I have been growing blueberries for the last umpteen years. Guess what? From dirty fingernails to you, I am a failure at growing blueberries.

To start with, I never realized blueberries are a long-term plant investment—it takes three to five years to produce full-size berries on young plants.

My first attempt to grow blueberries, in a lovely partially shaded place in my garden, was at least 15 years ago. I watched closely as they grew smaller and smaller. I personally have an excuse for growing smaller and smaller: I am “olding,” but the blueberry plants were not. These were very young and healthy plants. My recent research said blueberries need sun.

Realization 1. Suggestions about where to plant blueberries are confusing. While “in sun” is the most frequent answer, does that mean morning or afternoon, full sun or sun with partial shade? Summary of confusion: make sure there is plenty of morning sun. In the afternoon when it is hot, you can go inside, but blueberries need some shade.

A few years after the death of my last blueberry plant, I focused on location, location, location (sounds like I am buying a house or business, right?). Since tomatoes like sun but not scorching afternoon sun, I figured blueberries and tomatoes might become good friends. *Wrong!*

Realization 2. Tomatoes, potatoes, tobacco, and eggplants—the nightshade family—get very yucky in acid soil. Since acid soil is what blueberries thrive on, they will never become buddies with any of the nightshades. There are other no-nos for next-door neighbors, but the nightshades are the most significant.

For my second attempt at blueberry planting, I simply dug holes in my rose garden and popped in 12 varieties of blueberries. For your information, different varieties are needed for good pollination. The rose garden was not a terrible choice as far as sun goes, but I did not pay enough attention to watering. My roses seemed to do very well on water neglect and tolerated the hot sun. The blueberries did not. After three years of trying to grow blueberries to adulthood, I had to cut their lives short in the rose garden!

Realization 3. If water were wine, blueberries would be true alcoholics.

During the growing season, blueberries need at least one inch of water per week, depending on the outside temperature.



Healthy blueberries (thebarefootgardencenter.com).



Under watered blueberry plant (blogs.cornell.edu).

water needed, there is always the chance of overwatering. Gulp!

Good idea is to water during the daytime, straight at the base, so excess water will evaporate quickly. Watering directly on the leaves or berries can cause mildew or sunburn. Relatively speaking, blueberries do not have long tap roots to suck up water from way down under. In fact, at least 50 percent of the roots are located near the crown of the plant. Hence the need for an abundance of water. One more water thingy. It is still possible to overwater. So, if you are unsure if you are over or under watering, stick your finger in the soil or use a moisture meter.

Who blueberries love

Now for the rest of the story. Who do blueberries really love the very most? Did I hear you say “bees”? Well done, folks; you are spot-on. Also, blueberries are very liberal plants in that they love a variety of neighbors. In plant talk, that means different varieties of blueberries are planted together for healthy pollination.

Pollination happens when a bee bites the anther, the male part of a blueberry blossom (actually any blossom) and rubs the pollen grains from the anther on its legs. The bee then buzzes around again and transfers the pollen to the stigma, the female part of a blossom, on a different blueberry plant. Bees are like matchmakers; that is why blueberries love them. This is called cross-pollination. Next year’s “babies” will be strong and vibrant.

Always be yourself unless you can be a blueberry, then be a blueberry. —Anonymous

Dirty fingernails and all,
Sioux Rogers

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