

eLearning: Pilot project for blueberry growers in BC

New growers are entering our industry every year from different cultures and backgrounds. It is evident that there is a lack of knowledge on BC blueberry production practices. Prior farming experience and knowledge may not apply to the current industry. We need to bridge this gap in an innovative and effective manner. This project aims to develop Multilanguage tools in different formats such as videos, printed material and multimedia. As a result of this pilot program, growers and industry stakeholders will be better informed, environmentally- aware, innovative and market-responsive to their industry.



Connect Learn Grow



Connect Learn Grow

The Basics of Planting



Understanding farming

Make absolutely sure that farming blueberries is what you want to do → **It is a long term commitment**

Get informed, talk to those already in agriculture, such as established growers, packers, processors

Read and research about the industry, markets, cost and options before taking this important 1st step

Get family support

Ask for professional advice

Develop a business and marketing plan

Browse marketing strategies and labor needs

Most of the time farmers have to be managers, laborers, economists and business people rolled into one package



Understanding farming

Before developing a farm plan it is imperative that you understand the blueberry industry, its history and its probable future course (see our website for information on BC Blueberry industry: <http://www.bcblueberry.com/>)

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Will your farm be based solely, or primarily around blueberries, or will it be part of a more diversified operation?
- Will you be involved in all the activities (transport, labor, value added activities, etc)?
- How many acres are you prepared to manage?
- What kind of blueberry are you producing for (i.e. fresh market; processing ; early or late cultivars, mechanical or hand pick harvesting; etc)
- What prices can you reasonably expect for your product and what margin of profit do you plan to achieve?



Why a business plan

- Provides a guide for marketing, production, finance and personnel
- Provides credibility to the farm and the skills of the owner/manager
- Provides a guide for running a blueberry farm
- Provides an assessment of strength, weakness opportunities and threats both within the farm and from outside sources

**Every farm is unique, in terms of location, soil quality, people, etc.
A business plan should address all the points which are applicable to your farm.**



Why a marketing plan

- Helps to define the niche the business owner expects to fill.
- Helps to understand the blueberry industry and where your blueberry farm fits in-What part of the agriculture/blueberry industry will you operate in? How big is your operation? What exactly are you producing?
- Informs about Market sales, Volume of sales, Annual sales projections
 - Trends-past and current trends and their effects on business
 - Political/legal aspects of marketing-trade regulations
 - Competition- other growers who vie for market share
 - Customer analysis and response- Identify the customer base and how to respond to customer demands
 - Target and future sales- sales targets, new markets
 - Pricing- price setting, calculation cost, profit margins and markets prices
 - Promotional and Advertising
 - Distribution-transport, shipping and delivery

Why a marketing plan

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Potential growers should first determine exactly what buyers want, how they want it, and when they want it. Then, they should determine how these crops should be grown.

Blueberries



All blueberries belong to the genus *Vaccinium*. Blueberries are native to North America only. There are four species of blueberries commonly cultivated: **Highbush (*Vaccinium corymbosum*)**, Lowbush (*Vaccinium myrtilloides* and *Vaccinium angustifolium*), and Rabbiteye (*Vaccinium ashei*). The most obvious differences between the three types of blueberries are in their growth habit:

- Lowbush varieties typically grow to a height of from 30 to 60 cm (1 to 2 feet).
- **Highbush varieties will grow to a height of from 90 to 370 cm (6 to 13 feet), but normally are pruned to a height of 90 to 240 cm (6 to 8 feet).**
- Rabbiteye varieties can also grow quite tall, but are typically pruned to less than 300 cm (10feet).

British Columbia produces over 95% of the highbush blueberry crop in Canada. Other provinces that produce highbush blueberries include Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia. Over 99% of commercial blueberry production in British Columbia is located in the lower mainland region, with the remainder on Vancouver Island.

Growing Highbush Blueberries



Site selection/site preparation

An “ideal” site selection for highbush blueberries will have a well-drained; low pH soil (4.5 to 5.2) that has high organic matter content. The site should be exposed to full sunlight, have good air circulation, and have access to water for irrigation.

Site preparation should start one or two years before planting, as most sites require some slight modifications to prepare the soil for growing blueberries.

Perennial weeds should be completely eradicated by chemical and /or mechanical means.

Soil samples should be taking to determine the soil pH and other nutrient levels.

Fertilizer and other amendments needed to correct pH or nutrient deficiencies in the soil should be done at least six months prior to plant establishment.

One of the most important decisions a grower has to make is selecting a good site for blueberry plants. The large capital investment at the time of establishment and the fact that blueberry plants produce fruit for many years make site selection and preparation crucial decisions.

Growing Highbush Blueberries



Selecting a cultivar: Blueberry varieties can be selected so they can be harvested from July through mid-September.

Table 1: Characteristics of some varieties planted in the Fraser Valley, BC

Variety	Season	Bush habit	Qualities: Fruit	Primary use
Earlyblue	Early	Upright-moderately vigorous	Medium fruit, light blue, small scarf	Fresh market-u-pick operations
Duke	Early	Stocky , upright and open	Large fruit, light blue very firm, small scarf	Fresh or process markets
Reka	Early	Upright, very vigorous, open	Medium to large dark blue, firm and small scarf	Process May have “red back” if not fully ripe
1613-A (Hardy blue)	Mid	Upright, open	Medium size, medium firm, light blue	Process
Draper	Mid	Upright, vigorous	Large fruit, light blue, crisp and sweet flavor. Good storability	Process and fresh market
Bluegold	Mid	Compact, spreading	Sky blue, round, very firm, flavorful	Process and fresh
Bluecrop	Mid	Upright and open	Large fruit, light blue, slightly tart. Firm	Process and fresh market
Liberty	Late	Upright, vigorous, slightly open	Light blue, very firm, good flavor	Process and fresh market
Elliot	Very late	Upright and vigorous	Medium size, light blue, firm, slightly tart flavor	Fresh market
Aurora	Very late	Vigorous, spreading and round	Medium blue, firm and tart	Fresh market

Growing Highbush Blueberries



Planting/ spacing

Containerized blueberry plants: remove plants from pot and lightly roughen up the outside surface of the root ball. Mound the plant's top soil about 1/2 inch higher than the existing ground and firm around root ball. Then mound soil up along sides of exposed root mass and water in well.

Plants are spaced 0.9 to 1.5 m (4 to 5 feet) apart in the row. Spacing between rows can be 2.7 to 3.3 m (8 to 10 feet).

The most critical aspect of establishing a healthy berry planting is obtaining high quality planting stock that has a vigorous root system and is free from disease and insect pests. The plants should be obtained from a reputable nursery that participates in a certification program to ensure plants are free from diseases such as viruses and root diseases.

Check list for establishing a blueberry planting and taking care of plants the first year

- Select a good site
- Eliminate all perennial weeds before you plant and before they go to seed
- Test the soil pH a year before planting
- Prepare the soil the year before planting
 - ✓ Incorporate organic matter
 - ✓ Modify soil pH if necessary
 - ✓ If the site drains poorly, use tile drains or build raised beds
- Choose cultivar Plant in the fall or spring
- Apply sawdust mulches. Mulch keeps the soil cool, conserves moisture, add organic matter, improves soil structure, and aids weed control. Blueberries often grow more vigorously and produce better yields if they are mulched.
- Keep the planting weed free
- Irrigate as needed.



Initial investment in blueberry production is high, primarily because of the cost of preparing the land, establishing plants, and installing an irrigation system.

However, equipment needs for small plantings are minimal once the plants are established and healthy, well-tended plants can be expected to bear fruit for fifty years or more.

Make absolutely sure that farming blueberries is what you want to do.

Be prepared, get informed and ask for advice.

It is a long term commitment.



Funding provided by:





For more information

-*Basics of planting blueberries* (video) 2013, Episode 1.

May be viewed or downloaded from the web. Visit our website and look for the eLearning program: <http://www.bcblueberry.com/>

Copies of our publications and videos are also available in our office. Contact us by fax (604-864-2197); e mail: (research@bcblueberry.com), or phone (604-864-2117)

-*Berry production guide*. BCAGRI. <http://productionguide.agrifoodbc.ca/guides/14>

Disclaimer:

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