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YARDS AND GARDENS

PRUNING BLUEBERRIES

The basic job in pruning is to promote the growth of strong new wood, increase plant size, and maintain good fruit production. If too little pruning is done, the plants are crowded, with weak, twiggly growth, and fail to develop strong new wood for future production. Severe pruning produces fewer, larger berries and more new wood. Experience is the best guide on how hard to prune.

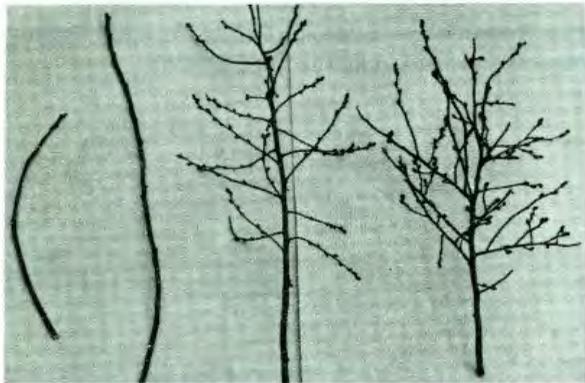
The best time to prune is January to mid-March. However, blueberries can be pruned any time from the end of harvest to the start of growth in late March.

Pruning two- and three-year-old plants at the time of planting is limited to removing the older twiggly growth from the base of the plants, leaving the strong new growth. If older plants are set out, more wood must be removed for balance between the top and roots. The blossoms should be stripped off young plants the first year or two in the field. Permitting young plants to set fruit slows growth. Long-run production will be best if

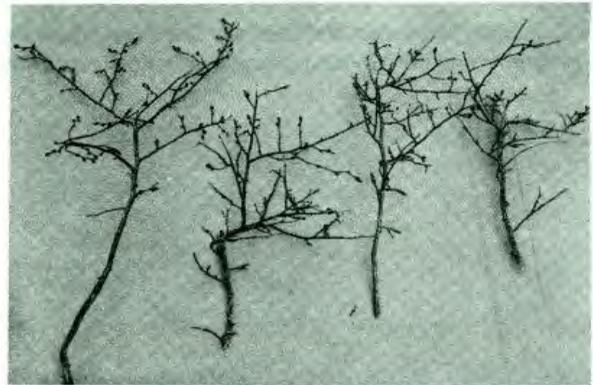
plant growth, rather than berry production, is emphasized.

Pruning established, mature plants consists of cutting out, or cutting back, old canes that have little strong new wood and eliminating the weak, twiggly growth in the top or outer areas of the bushes. Following a series of steps may systematize your pruning job and make it easier:

1. Cut out any damaged or broken canes.
2. Cut out some (usually one or two) older canes. Choose those with the weakest growth on them. Sometimes it will be possible to cut the cane back to a strong new side branch.
3. Cut out low branches and short, soft new shoots that developed from the base of the plant late in the season.



Left: first-year wood; right: second- and third-year wood. The first-year canes are not branched and will not produce much fruit during the coming season, but they are essential to crops in succeeding years. The second- and third-year canes have laterals or twigs with good vigor and many strong fruit buds. They are the best fruiting wood.



Third-year and older wood with small, weak laterals and few fruit buds. This type of wood is not productive. It crowds and weakens young wood and should be removed. Cut canes back to the ground or a strong new side shoot. If one or two old canes are cut each year and one or two new ones produced, none will be over four to six years old—a good goal to work for.



BEFORE PRUNING

4. Remove weak, twiggy wood from the top and outer parts of the plant. Remove enough from the top to let light down into the plant center.
5. If your plants tend to "overbear," tip back some of the small shoots carrying a heavy load of fruit buds. Cut off about one-third of the fruit buds.

Blueberry fruit buds are near the tips of the past season's growth. They are larger, fatter, and less pointed than vegetative buds. Vegetative buds are farther back from the shoot tips. They produce the new shoots for the next season's crop.



AFTER PRUNING

Commercial growers, with limited time, will prune with the fewest possible cuts, taking out clusters of old twiggy growth even though they may leave some weak, twiggy growth and remove some good fruiting wood. Home gardeners, with more time, can snip out weak twigs and leave the stronger new shoots.

Good plant nutrition, soil moisture, freedom from damage by root weevils, and freedom from competition with grasses and weeds, as well as proper pruning, are essential to growth of strong new wood and berry production. If your plants do not respond to pruning, work more on other factors affecting growth.

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