

Blueberries for Dakota

Blueberries are delicious. I'm starting a backyard orchard this spring and my wife and kids want blueberries in the garden.

Sorry, blueberries are not for North Dakota.

We don't have the right *soil* to grow blueberries. Blueberries demand a very acidic soil (pH 4.5—5.5) to absorb the nutrients they need.

We don't have acidic soils in North Dakota. Prairie soils are generally neutral to slightly alkaline (pH 7.0—8.0) and sometimes salty.

We don't have the right *climate* to grow blueberries. Blueberries are hardy only to Zone 4. Most of our state is in Zone 3. Blueberry plants will freeze to death. Even if you live in Zone 4 (the southern one-third and along the Red River), the blueberry plants can die unless they are blanketed with snow. Snow hasn't been a problem in recent winters—but what about next year?

Blueberries are wimpy plants and North Dakota is no place for wimpy plants.

Don't get me wrong—you can grow blueberries. We can grow bananas too. It just isn't easy. Mother Nature is a fierce force in our state. It is much easier to work *with* Mother Nature than fight *against* her. She almost always wins.

Although it is very tough to grow real blueberries here, we can easily grow fruits that look and taste like blueberries.

Start with Juneberries (*Amelanchier alnifolia*). I quickly learned when moving to the Dakotas that Juneberries are treasured here. They are hardy everywhere in our state and do not require an acid soil. The best varieties come from Canada, where these "saskatoons" have been grown for decades.

Plants can grow 12 feet tall or taller and should be spaced 6 to 8 feet apart. Once the berries start to ripen, you will be fighting the birds to eat them—netting is recommended.

Besides the delicious fruit, you will love the white blossoms in spring and the brilliant orange fall color of its leaves.

Juneberry crops are not totally reliable. The flowers are sensitive to late spring frosts. Keep them out of frost pockets. A location sheltered from winds is also preferred.

Canadian haskaps (*Lonicera caerulea*) are very easy to grow here. These blue-fruited honeysuckles (shown above) thrive in our prairie soils. The plants are



hardy to -40°F . The shrubs grow up to 6 feet tall and are easy to manage.

For both Juneberries and haskaps, you can expect decent crops after three years (two pounds per bush) and up to 10 pounds per bush after six years. Nice!

Juneberries are available from St. Lawrence Nursery and haskaps are available from Jung among other sources. I've seen them at some local nurseries, too.

With apologies to my family, we are not going to plant blueberries in our garden. Instead, our garden will be full of haskaps. They will thank me in a couple of years as they fill their faces with the tasty blue fruits. DG

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