

Organic Blueberries

Introduction

The highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) is a perennial shrub that will do well in most areas of Kentucky as long as the soil pH is properly adjusted. Organic production requires the use of pest management and fertilization methods that do not include synthetic compounds. Growers producing and selling their berries with an organic label must be certified by a USDA-approved state or private agency and follow production standards regulated by the National Organic Program (NOP).

Marketing

Locating markets for organic produce often requires more time and effort than locating markets for conventionally produced crops. It is important for organic producers to identify markets willing to pay the premium prices necessary to make organic production profitable.

Blueberries are strong sellers when offered at Kentucky's farmers markets, roadside stands, or other direct markets. U-Pick is one of the most desirable ways to market blueberries in Kentucky because it eliminates considerable harvest labor expense. Promotions for organic U-Pick operations should mention the benefits of picking and handling organically grown fruit.

Restaurants, local grocers, and health food stores may be interested in Kentucky-grown organic products. Berries are also an attractive addition to a community supported



agriculture (CSA) share. Produce auctions present yet another marketing opportunity, especially for well-packaged berries. There may be small in-state companies that would be interested in purchasing organic fresh or frozen blueberries for processing into value-added products.

Market Outlook

Increased consumer interest in organic fruit, along with improved organic production techniques, has contributed to making organic fruit production more desirable. In addition, the identification of antioxidant properties in blueberry fruit (along with other health benefits) has helped increase consumer interest in these berries. Currently blueberries are considered one of Kentucky's emerging small fruit crops. Thus, producing blueberries organically could add further value to this already popular fruit. The KDA reports only four Kentucky farms currently in certified organic blueberry production, a fact that could indicate the potential for additional organic production in the state.

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In addition to local fresh market sales, organic blueberries appear to be an excellent prospect for value-added products. Growers may want to investigate supplying organic fruit to jam producers or manufacturing their own value-added items as part of their total marketing plan. Berry products (such as jams, juices, syrups, and baked goods) are popular with consumers and can be a way to increase the profitability of the entire enterprise. Wholesale markets for blueberries, including organic berries, are highly competitive because of over production at the national level. Growers should have a well-developed marketing plan in place prior to producing berries for sale at wholesale price levels.

Production Considerations

Site selection and preparation

Only land that has been free of prohibited substances (e.g. synthetic pesticides and artificial fertilizers) for 3 years can be certified for organic production. A well-maintained blueberry planting can continue to produce for 40 years. Because of this crop's longevity, it is important to be very selective in choosing an appropriate planting site. This is especially true for organic production. It is also essential to devote the necessary time to site preparation and soil build-up prior to planting. Depending on existing soil conditions, this can take one to two (or more) seasons.

Select a high elevation site with good internal soil drainage and adequate air circulation. Blueberries thrive in a highly organic soil with a pH of 4.5 to 5.2. While most Kentucky soils do not meet these requirements, sites that have less than 2,500 pounds of calcium per acre can be amended to provide an environment suitable for planting. Typically elemental sulfur or aluminum sulfate is used to acidify the soil; however, organic growers should be conservative in their use of sulfur due to its potential negative effect on beneficial soil microbes. Sphagnum peat moss (without a wetting agent) and cottonseed meal (from non-GMO cotton), while more costly, can also be used to lower soil pH.

A crop rotation plan designed to reduce weed pressure is a critical aspect of site preparation. Avoid planting in fields where aggressive perennial weeds have a history of being difficult to manage. Because herbicides cannot be used, organic growers will need to implement alternative measures to control perennial weeds prior to planting. Strategies include selecting planting sites with low weed pressure, tillage, and the use of smother crops.

Soil fertility is enhanced through cover crops, composts, green manure, animal manure, and approved natural fertilizers. Select green manure and cover crops that can be grown under acid soil conditions, such as crimson clover, buckwheat, cereal rye, and spring oats. Any cover crop, green manure, or smother crop planted in a certified organic field must be grown from organic seed. Individual certifiers may permit the use of untreated conventional seed if attempts to acquire organic seed fail.

Cultivar and stock selection

Organic production requires the use of certified organic planting stock that has not been treated with synthetic materials. Unfortunately, the availability of organic blueberry planting stock is limited. When organic stock cannot be obtained, growers will have to request approval from the certifier to use conventionally produced stock. According to NOP regulations, non-organic stock must be managed organically for at least one year after transplanting before the berries can be sold as certified organic produce. However, because blueberry bushes do not generally begin producing a crop until the third year after planting, there should not be a problem meeting the NOP's one-year restriction.

Blueberry cultivars differ as to when they mature; however, they will normally supply ripe berries for a 2- to 3-week harvest period. By careful cultivar selection, a continuous supply of fresh berries can be produced throughout the fruiting season. Regardless, a minimum of two varieties are needed to assure cross pollination.

Select cultivars that produce large, firm, light blue fruit with good aroma and flavor. Other desirable characteristics include resistance to cracking and good keeping quality. Disease resistance will also be an important factor for organic producers to consider. Consult the UK publication *Growing Highbush Blueberries in Kentucky* and/or your county Extension agent for recommended cultivars.

Planting and crop maintenance

Two-year-old virus-free plants, either bare-rooted or potted, should be planted in late fall once plants are dormant, or early in spring before growth starts. Blueberries should be planted on raised beds to improve soil drainage and avoid *Phytophthora* root rot. Planting rows in a north-south orientation is preferred. Apply organic mulch (such as untreated sawdust or woodchips) after planting. Commercial blueberry production should be considered only if large amounts of organic mulching material are available.

At least two cultivars should be planted for cross pollination. Honeybees must be relied upon to aid pollination and two hives per acre are recommended. No cultivar should be separated by more than two rows from a cultivar with similar bloom or fruit maturity period.

Alleyways or row middles are normally managed by planting a non-aggressive grass. Tall fescue or perennial ryegrass will tolerate low soil pH and are compatible with blueberry production. Sodded middles will need to be mowed several times during the year.

Blueberries should be grown with irrigation, UK tests show that irrigation more than doubles blueberry yields. Soil moisture needs to be closely monitored when trickle irrigation is used so that the soil is kept damp, but not wet. Any liquid fertilizer applied via drip irrigation lines must be approved for organic production. Supplemental organic nutrient choices include compost, bloodmeal, fishmeal, cottonseed meal, soybean meal, and many others. NOP regulations

regarding the use of composted and raw (non-composted) manure must be followed.

Pruning

On sites where plants are growing well, commercial growers will maintain bushes at a maximum height of 6 feet for ease of harvest. Annual pruning, which may be done from February to bud break in the spring, is necessary to help establish and develop vigorous plants, as well as increase fruit size. Pruning is also essential for removing dead and diseased canes.

Pest management

Few diseases or insect pests pose a serious threat to blueberries in Kentucky, which makes them a good prospect for organic production. Pest management in organic plantings emphasizes prevention through good production practices. Healthy, fast-growing plants are better able to tolerate or outgrow pest problems. Following good integrated pest management (IPM) principles is essential for producing a high-quality organic crop. This includes careful site and cultivar selection, proper soil preparation, and following good cultural practices. Monitoring diseases and pests with frequent crop inspections and accurate identification are critical to keeping ahead of and/or managing potential problems. The goal is not necessarily the complete elimination of a pest, but rather to manage pests and diseases so that crop damage is kept within acceptable economic levels.

Diseases such as twig blights and stem cankers can cause some losses, especially if allowed to spread into larger branches and the crown. *Phytophthora* root rot may be a problem for plants grown in poorly drained or heavy clay soils. Berry diseases include anthracnose and mummy berry. Iron chlorosis commonly occurs on sites with a pH level above 5.2. Planting disease-free, resistant/tolerant planting stock in the best possible growing site is an important first step in reducing the threat of disease losses. Other disease management techniques include sanitation, proper pruning, and good moisture management. Timely harvests that minimize the

number of overripe berries on bushes, along with encouraging good air circulation, can help lessen the incidence of fruit rots.

Insect pests include Japanese beetles, bagworms, plum curculio, and occasionally blueberry maggot. Pruning, sanitation, weed control, and some organically approved insecticides may aid in pest control. Hand picking, exclusion, trapping, and targeting grubs with tillage are some of the techniques used to manage Japanese beetles.

Birds pose a serious threat to blueberries, particularly in small plantings. Visual and auditory repellents have been used with varying success. The most effective method of protecting plants from birds is to cover bushes with netting just before berries begin to color and then removing it after harvest is complete. Other wildlife pests can include wild turkeys, voles, rabbits, and deer. Rodents may be more of a problem in mulched plantings and where row middles are not kept closely mowed.

The main challenge to organic growers, however, is often weed control. If left unchecked, weeds compete with plants for water and nutrients, harbor insect and disease pests, and reduce air circulation. Since herbicides cannot be used, organic growers will need to implement alternative measures. An important first step is to avoid planting in sites with high noxious perennial weed populations. Along with site selection, site preparation should be aimed at making sure existing weeds are under control prior to planting. Managing weeds during plant establishment is especially important. A thick layer of mulch around plants will aid in controlling weeds within the row while sodded middles and mowing can minimize weeds in the alleyways. Weed control in established plantings includes mowing and hand weeding.

Harvest and storage

Only those crops that have met NOP production and certification standards, including the 3-year

minimum transition period, can be marketed and sold as certified organic or organic. Harvest equipment, storage areas, and packing materials must comply with NOP standards. Growers producing both conventional and organic crops (referred to as a split operation) must either use separate equipment and facilities for these operations or decontamination protocol must be followed before use in the organic side of the enterprise. Packaging materials must be protected against potential contamination from prohibited substances. In split operations, separate picking containers and storage areas are required.

Blueberries should be allowed to ripen to a uniform blue color on the plant before handpicking. Fruit flavor and sugar content will not improve after harvest. Berries need to be picked at least once per week during the harvest period, beginning in early to mid-June and ending in early August. Blueberries can remain on the plant for up to 10 days without a loss in quality. Freshly harvested berries may be stored for up to 2 weeks with proper refrigeration.

Labor requirements

Organic systems are more labor-intensive than conventional systems. This is largely the result of increased labor times required for monitoring and managing pests, as well as more labor for weed control. Organic growers may spend 10% to 20% (or more) additional owner labor hours than conventional growers. More hired labor hours are likely to be required for weed control in organic blueberry systems.

Production labor needs per acre for a mature organic planting are about 350 to 400 hours for a farm retail operation. Ten to 15 pickers are needed per acre for hand harvesting. U-Pick farms will require approximately 40 to 120 hours per acre in labor, depending on how much management is involved while visitors are on the farm. Illinois data indicates that it takes roughly 450 U-Pick customers to harvest an acre of blueberries, with the average customer picking 11.7 pounds of berries (about 15 pints).

Economic Considerations

The major investments in establishing blueberries include the cost of plants, land preparation, labor required for plant establishment, and installation of an irrigation system. A major expense and labor requirement for organic blueberry production is weed control by hand labor, mechanical cultivation, and/or mulching. Producers who choose to sell their blueberries at retail or wholesale markets will also incur a significant expense in purchasing some type of cold storage. Pest control, such as erecting netting systems to prevent bird damage to blueberry crops, can also create a significant expense.

While the initial investment may be large, blueberry plants, with proper care, will remain productive for as long as 40 to 50 years. Because it takes 3 years for plants to become established, blueberries will not usually begin to generate economic returns toward their establishment cost until the fourth season. Five-year establishment costs per acre (including the value of operator labor and management) for an organic system are estimated at \$6,000 to \$9,000 (farm retail) and \$6,000 to \$8,200 (U-Pick) for 2010. The payback period is 6 years after planting for farm retail and 5 years after planting for U-Pick. Annual returns to owner capital and management for an established planting are \$5,200 to \$8,800 per acre for farm retail and \$7,000 to \$11,000 per acre for U-Pick.

These profitability estimates assume an average price of \$2 per pint for certified organic blueberries. Organic blueberries typically sell for 10% to 20% more than conventionally grown berries. Generally, a 15% to 25% price premium for organic blueberries grown in Kentucky will be necessary for organic production systems to match potential profitability from conventionally grown blueberries. Producers should always identify the possibility of price premiums for

organic products in their target market before investing labor and capital into a particular production system.

Selected Resources

- Crop Budgets: Berries (University of Kentucky, 2008) *3 blueberry budget files*
<http://www.uky.edu/Ag/cdbrec/budgets.html>
- Growing Highbush Blueberries in Kentucky, HO-60 (University of Kentucky, 2003)
<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/ho/ho60/ho60.htm>
- Blueberries: Organic Production (ATTRA, 2004)
<https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=14>
- Organic Small Fruit Disease Management Guidelines: Integrated Management of Blueberry Diseases (Ohio State University)
<http://www.oardc.ohio-state.edu/fruitpathology/organic/blueberry/All-Blueberries.html>
- Organic Way: Organic Methods for Blueberry Nutrition (Pennsylvania State University)
<http://www.fruit.cornell.edu/berry/production/pdfs/blueberries/owbbnutrition.pdf>
- Organic Way: Preventative Disease Management for Highbush Blueberry (Pennsylvania State University)
<http://www.fruit.cornell.edu/berry/production/pdfs/blueberries/owbbdismgmt.pdf>
- Organic Weed Control Toolbox (eXtension, 2010)
<http://www.extension.org/article/18532>
- Pocket Guide to IPM Scouting in Highbush Blueberries, Extension Bulletin E-2928 (Michigan State University, 2004)
http://www.ipm.msu.edu/pubs_blue.htm
- Production Guide for Organic Blueberries (Cornell University, 2011) *2.2 MB file*
http://nysipm.cornell.edu/organic_guide/blueberry.pdf

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For additional information, contact your local [County Extension](#) agent