Blueberries can work well in the traditional landscape

Did you know that you can plant shrubs that not only provide beauty but food as well? Well, it's true. Blueberries can fit into almost any home landscape design and can serve as hedges, borders or backgrounds.

Blueberries truly offer much to a landscape. In spring, delicate, white, bell-shaped flowers add excitement to the landscape. In summer, the attractive blue fruit adds interest. In the fall, the shrub produces beautiful fall color, a sought-after rarity in Northwest Florida.

Blueberries can be very easy to grow because they have very few insect or disease problems, and pesticides are rarely needed.

**Finding the right spot**
Blueberries yield the highest amount of fruit when planted in full sun. Full sun means at least six to eight hours of direct sun a day. However, this plant will grow in less sun, up to 50 percent less. Expect less fruit when growing in partial shade.

Blueberries are very sensitive to soil pH. They prefer to grow in an acid soil with a pH of around 4.0 to 5.3. Therefore, do not place your blueberries within 20 feet of a house foundation or a concrete sidewalk or driveway. One way to know if you soil pH is appropriate is to have it tested. Contact your local Extension office for information on how to get your soil pH tested. If your soil is above 6.0, do not attempt blueberries in that location.

**Choosing the right variety**
There are different kinds of blueberry shrubs depending on where you live. In Northwest Florida, rabbiteye blueberries perform the best because they can take the heat.

One thing to remember is that rabbiteyes are self-sterile. Since cross-pollination is necessary for fruit set, plant more than one variety.
To have fresh blueberries all summer long, choose early, mid- and late-season varieties. 'Beckyblue', 'Bonita', 'Austin' and 'Climax' are three early-season rabbiteye cultivars that are widely grown in Florida. While these early-season varieties are not as productive as later bloomers, they do serve the function of prolonging your harvest period. Brightwell, Tifblue and Powderblue are generally the most spring freeze resistant. With early, mid-and late-season varieties, you should enjoy fresh blueberries for six weeks.

Fertilization
Blueberries are extremely sensitive to fertilizer. Do not apply any fertilizer when planting. Blueberries respond best to frequent, light fertilization. They can be killed or damaged by over fertilization. It is best to begin on the lean side and gradually increase fertilizer rates as you gain experience with your soil type and the kinds of fertilizer you are using.

Pruning
At planting, prune back one-third of the top growth on potted plants. Remove low, twiggy growth entirely and tip remaining shoots to remove all the flower buds. Remove all the flower buds so that the plants will not flower the first year.

After establishment, rabbiteye blueberries require little pruning until they reach about six to eight feet in height. At this point, a cane renewal pruning program should be started. Remove one to three of the largest canes each winter at ground level or a total of about 20 percent of the canopy. Over a period of five years the bush will be totally renewed.

In Florida, summer topping is used to maintain the shrub at an appropriate height and should be done soon after harvest, usually during July.

Plant sale
If you would like to add blueberries to your landscape, the Santa Rosa County Master Gardener will have three varieties for sale at the Emerald Coast Flower and Garden Festival. The festival is April 9, 10 and 11, 2010 at the PJC Milton Campus.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information on County Extension Services and other articles of interest go to http://santarosa.ifas.ufl.edu.