

KOOTENAY & BOUNDARY FARM ADVISORS (KBFA)

Blueberry Production 2018

July 28, Christina Lake & July 29, Harrop

Event Overview

Dr. Eric Gerbrandt, independent berry consultant and research director for the BC Blueberry Council, gave two workshops on blueberry production at Creekside Blueberries (Christina Lake), and West Arm Apiaries (Harrop).

Resources

- BC Blueberry Council: bcblueberry.com
- Northwest Berry Foundation: nwberryfoundation.org/
- Pacific Northwest Pest Management Handbook: pnwhandbooks.org/
- BC Ministry of Agriculture – Berry Production Guide: productionguide.agrifoodbc.ca/



Dr. Eric Gerbrandt talks blueberries at West Arm Apiaries in Harrop.

Key Messages

Preparation

- **Soil PH:** Blueberry plants require soil PH of 4.5 – 5.2. This is more acidic than most soils in the Kootenay region. PH can be lowered by adding sulphur, however, be careful to not add too much and monitor to see change in PH before planting (6 -12 months). Blueberry plants grown outside this PH range will never achieve the yields and vigour they could if in ideal PH range. Dr. Gerbrandt stressed this is the most important factor for success.
- **Soil fertility:** A pre-planting soil test is necessary and will inform a nutrient management plan. Granular soil applications of N,P,K recommended. Apply at end of bloom period as plant can uptake nutrients best at this time. Blueberry plants show N deficiency with red leaves, often due to high pH.
- **Irrigation:** Plan your irrigation system before planting. To establish strong plants, regular watering is required. Even short periods without water can stunt or kill plants. Two rows of suspended drip irrigation is recommended, with emitters offset to achieve complete water coverage.
- **Variety selection:** Choose the variety based on the purpose of the crop. For example, ripening times, berry size, firmness and flavor are all influenced by variety. There is excellent overviews of recommended varieties in the BC Ministry of Ag's Berry Production Guide (see resource list above). High bush blueberry varieties are the only kind that work for BC.

Establishment

- **Top 4 factors for success:** ideal PH range, appropriate varietal, soil fertility, bed and alley (weed) management.
- **Seedlings/stock:** Purchase 18" plants (i.e.: don't purchase too small) with a good root-ball from a specialist blueberry nursery. Plant at 3' spacing with 10' between rows.
- **First two years:** De-blossom and fertilize generously.
- **Canopy management:** Consider trellising (posts and wires 24" off the ground and 16" apart). Trellising makes harvesting easier as fruit is higher off ground, allows for easier mowing of

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alleyways, and is more sanitary as berries are kept off ground. Note that wires may need to be “dropped” during winter to avoid snow-load breaking branches.

- **Pruning:** Prune annually when plants are dormant to renew the plant. The greatest yields are from 2-3 year old stems. In the Kootenay region, pruning in the early spring (as opposed to fall) is likely the best time to avoid damage due to cold winter temperatures harming new pruning cuts.
- **Bed and alley management:** Keep weed competition as low as possible. Grass roots encroaching on plants will have significant impact on plant vigour. Best control method: mulch around plants and mow alleyways.
- **Pollination:** Native bees are the best pollinators.

Photos



Dr. Gerbrandt demonstrates how trellising could support the plants at Creekside Blueberries.



Creekside Blueberries has some challenges with grass and weed management around the plants partially due to landscape fabric that was laid pre-planting (and is now buried under a layer of duff and grass). The fabric creates a barrier for nutrient applications.



Two main varieties are planted at Creekside Blueberries. One variety provides large, easy to pick berries and the other for smaller, more flavorful berries that are good for baking.

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