

Protect Blueberries Over The Winter

Mulching blueberries in the fall is one of the easiest ways to prevent healthy plants from sever winter injury, dieback, and poor yields. Mulch actually improves the root system of the plants, improve the winter survival of plants and increase plant height and fruit yields the following year.

On cold and still fall nights when radiant frost occurs, heavy cold air drains into lower field blueberry plantings and may cause injury to some plants. For this reason, avoid pruning blueberries in the fall. Prune instead in the early Spring.

But, why protect blueberry plants now? Often, parts of Pennsylvania have little snow cover. Low temperatures and little snow cover creates the worst possible conditions for the newly-planted and established blueberries. A cold snap in the fall can be especially deadly to weakened plants by killing dor-

Mulches are considered essential for winter production especially on sandy loam and droughty soils. A reliable thermometer that registers current and minimum temperatures can

mant flower buds.

help predict the extent of winter injury.

Winter protection studies have looked at the hardiness of each blueberry variety. These studies have found each vari-

ety's winter hardiness is dependent on how the plants go into and come out of winter dormancy. A cold snap in the fall could be deadly especially if it occurs early in the season. Also, plants going into dormancy with a moist soil environment are less

likely to be injured.

Some highbush varieties are more winter hard than others. Several hardy varieties are listed in the Commercial Pennsylvania Small Fruit Production and Pest Management Guide available at the Extension office. They include bluecrop, bluegold, bluejay, blueray, duke, elizabeth, elliott, herbert, jersey, lateblue, nelson, patriot and spartan.

Mulches work as insulators. Even snow makes an excellent mulch. A mulch restricts heat in the soil from moving up around the plant. For example, when the air temperature was -35° F in a Minnesota study, it was -11' under 6 inches of snow.

If waiting for snow seems too risky, try a 1/8th-inch plastic mulch, row cover materials, rye straw, oak leaves, chopped corn stalks, oak sawdust or peat moss. Each type of mulch has its advantages and disadvantages. Each provide some protection against winter's worst weather.

At least 4 to 6 inches of organic matter is recommended. Replenish the mulch each year to keep the mulch depth at 2 to 4 inches. Other mulches used by gardeners include buckwheat hulls, shredded and composted leaves, wood chips, ground corn cobs, grass clippings, coco hulls and salthay. The two best are Fofted sawdust and composted hardwood bark.

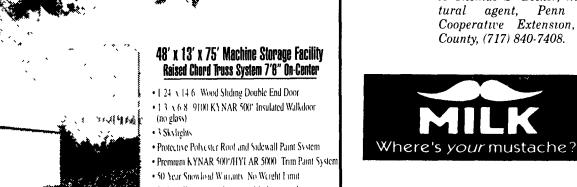
A leaf mulch of oak, locust, beech, maple, sycamore and even pine needles have worked well as mulches. But, replenishing the mulch cover has to occur each year. Even composted manure or stable bedding has been looked at as mulching material.

Avoid grass clipping from areas previously treated with herbicide. Burlap is not a good idea. Also, avoid fresh grass clippings that will overheat and ferment. Be careful using peat moss, legume hay, straw, and mushroom soil. For example, mushroom soil may raise the pH of the soil. Other mulches crust on the surface. This reduces water penetrating to the roots of blueberries.

Some materials work better than others with young plantings. Straw helps to catch snow on younger plantings but is difficult to remove in the Spring. Leaves are time consuming to apply and remove For example 2-1/2 bags of leaves is needed to cover a relatively small number

For all the organic mulches, 1 to 2 year old mulching materials are preferred. Materials like aged or fresh pine bark or peat moss are easily incorporated prior to planting blueberries each Spring.

Any questions can be directed to Thomas S Becker, horticul tural agent, Penn State Cooperative Extension, York County, (717) 840-7408.





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