

Blueberry Pruning

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SPEAKERS

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C Christa Hartsook 00:15

Hello, and welcome to the Small Farms Podcast, a production of the Small Farms Program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life.

O Olivia Hanlon 00:29

So now that we're through those ugly, cold temperatures that we've had recently and spring is knocking on our door, it's time to get pruning our fruit crops. Last time you were on, Joe, you talked about pruning raspberries and today we're going to talk about pruning blueberries. I'm Olivia Hanlon, Education Extension Specialist with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and welcome to the Small Farms Sustainability Podcast. With me today is Joe Hannan, Commercial Horticulture Field Specialist with Iowa State University. Welcome, Joe!

J Joe Hannan 01:29

So, Olivia, our primary goal is to kind of rotate out old canes and rotate in new canes. So productivity on our canes when they reach about three to four years, that's when they're most productive, and then as you get into years five and six the canes really start to become not productive pretty quickly. They rapidly fall off. So we're trying to, like I said, get the old canes out and bring new canes in so that we always have an even balance of material. And really what we're looking for is a balance of stuff from one year old, so stuff that grew last year, through stuff that's five or six years old. So we want one or two canes that are one year old, one or two canes that are two years old, etc., etc. all the way up to one maybe two canes that are in that five to six year old range, and that's our end goal here.

O Olivia Hanlon 02:29

It's good. How's it going on your end? Absolutely! So, looking at getting started with pruning

our blueberries, what are the basic principles of pruning for blueberries?

J

Joe Hannan 02:38

Hi, Olivia! How's it going today? It's warm! Warm and toasty. Yeah! So, it's 35 degrees out today, gonna be 40 degrees. We've got a good week of warm-ish weather, although it's still 40-some degrees warmer than it was last week. So yeah, it's time to start pruning blueberries and look forward to spring!

O

Olivia Hanlon 02:38

Ok, so then how do we get started?

J

Joe Hannan 02:45

So, first thing we're going to do is go out and take off anything that is diseased, or damaged, or gives you the heebie jeebies, or just doesn't look right. We had a lot of nasty weather last year, nobody is going to forget the derecho on top of everything else that went on, so there could be some damaged material out there. We're just going to go in and take all of that out first. Then we're going to start by looking at, okay, what are the one or two really nice new canes that grew last year, and we're going to keep those, and then anything else that grew up out of the ground or out of the crown last year, we're going to get rid of because we only want one or two new replacement canes. The one year old canes will look a little bit different than the older, more mature two years old and beyond. The new canes that grew last year will generally be kind of a brownish, red, brownish-red type smooth bark. They just haven't really developed that full, woody, gray bark on them yet. So that's that's what the new one year old canes look like. We're looking for stuff that is vigorous and upright. So we don't want something that is going to be six inches tall and start to shoot off and spread out because it's not going to get and grow upright for us and be at picking height. And we want stuff that is not really a bull cane. So bull cane has a lot of vegetative growth, a long space in between nodes, and the nodes are where our leaves would be and where fruit buds will be down the road. So we're just trying to find something that's a good healthy material, not weak and scrawny, but also not super huge, overly vegetative, and wonky is a technical term there too, so.

O

Olivia Hanlon 04:17

I'll believe it!

J

Joe Hannan 04:18

Yeah, so we're gonna, like I said, keep the nicest one or two of the one year old canes and then we're going to take out everything else. So anything that is... that we're not keeping from one year old materials, just go ahead and prune that out and then go in and open up the canopy a little bit. If you've got fruiting wood that's way down at ground level and things you might just take that out, like you're not going to go down and bend over and get that when it comes time

to harvest, so just clean that up. If anything is really overlapping and crossing within the plant canopy itself you can open that up a little bit, but that's pretty much all you're looking to do when you're pruning blueberries. They're generally pretty simple.

O Olivia Hanlon 04:58

Yeah, that does seem pretty easy if that's really all there is to it, Joe.

J Joe Hannan 05:02

Yeah, you know, you can go in and do a little bit of pruning in the upper canopy, trying to remove a few fruit buds in order to get a few less fruit but to get a little bit larger fruit, but I honestly, I don't generally do that. I just kind of work on speeding through taking out the old stuff, keep the new stuff, taking out any other junk and I call it a day at that point.

O Olivia Hanlon 05:25

Alright. So when we're looking at our tools that we're going to use, what kind of pruners do you prefer to use for pruning blueberries, Joe?

J Joe Hannan 05:30

So when I'm taking out anything that's old (that five or six year old material), I like to use a loppers. It's a two handed tool for cutting off material, a loppers is more appropriately sized for taking off something that's going to be an inch or better in diameter. I really like my Fiskars brand, though there's lots of other brands out there. And then for any of that new one year old canes that I've taken out or any other little minor pruning I'm doing in there, I just use a little hand bypass pruner. So Felco and Corona make these pretty common, but there's other ones out there on the market.

O Olivia Hanlon 06:07

Okay, so when we've got all of our pruning done, and we've got those leftover prunings, what are we going to do with those?

J Joe Hannan 06:13

Typically, you'd pull it out and either burn it or compost it. You want to get rid of any overwintering pathogens, or insects, or anything that's on that pruning material. So burning it is the most assured way to get it up to temperature to kill anything that's there. You can compost it, but you have to be careful and make sure that you actually get your compost pile hot enough to kill any pathogens.

○ Olivia Hanlon 06:36
Alright, Joe, is there anything else that we should be doing right now with our blueberries?

○ Joe Hannan 06:40
You know, make sure you have a good weed mulch down to keep weeds from coming up here in a few weeks when the ground falls out, warms up. Any large weed material that was out there, just go ahead and pull that out and get it cleaned up. Otherwise, it's too early to fertilize or anything like that yet. So really just get the field cleaned up and get it ready for spring.

○ Olivia Hanlon 07:00
Alright. So we've had a pretty quick and down to the point one here, Joe. Is there anything we missed that you would like to add here?

○ Joe Hannan 07:06
No, Olivia, that's pretty much it. I mean, blueberries are pretty simple to prune and maintain.

○ Olivia Hanlon 07:11
Alright. Well, thanks, Joe, as always, for joining me today. And I'm sure we will have you back on again here soon.

○ Joe Hannan 07:18
I'm sure I'll see you next week or the following week.

○ Olivia Hanlon 07:21
Sounds good. Thanks, Joe.

○ Joe Hannan 07:23
Thanks.

○ Iowa State University Extension and Outreach 07:23
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