

Pruning Blueberries

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Blueberry bushes should be pruned every year during the dormant season (January through March). Good pruning practices promote higher fruit quality, earlier ripening, and reduces the likelihood of fruit rots.

For the first two years after planting, simply remove any dead branches and all weak, spindly growth. Do not over prune young bushes because this can slow the development of a strong root system and plant crown. A productive, well-managed blueberry plant should have eight to twelve healthy, vigorous, upright canes which range in age from one to six years old. To achieve this follow the steps below for all plants that have been established for three years or more.

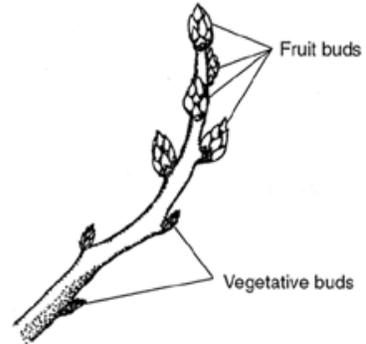


Figure 1. Types of buds on a blueberry shoot

A short video demonstration of blueberry pruning is available online from the University of Maine Cooperative Extension. It can be seen at this website: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fm6ZfpGy5oQ>

1. Prune out any weak, low-growing or diseased canes.
2. Prune out any canes that are more than six years old (these are usually the thickest canes, which are gray in color with peeling bark). Blueberry canes tend to be less productive once they are more than six years old and should be pruned out in favor of younger, more productive canes. Cut the old canes back to ground level unless new cane growth has been sparse; in which case, leave a four- to eight-inch stub above the ground. New canes may sprout from these stubs.
3. Thin the remaining canes, leaving those with the most vigorous shoot growth (long, thick branches with good fruit buds). Leave six to eight vigorous two- to five-year-old canes and three to four one-year-old canes per bush. A mature blueberry plant should have eight to twelve healthy canes varying in age from one to six years old.
4. Remove any weak fruiting branches on the remaining canes, especially those less than six inches in length. Most fruit is produced on vigorous one-year-old shoots on healthy two- to five-year-old canes. The fruit buds on these shoots are large and teardrop-shaped. Each bud will produce a cluster of five to eight flowers. The shoots also have smaller, pointed vegetative buds that will produce leaves (Figure 1).

Old, neglected bushes that have not been pruned for years can be renovated by pruning out a quarter to a third of the oldest canes (tallest, thickest) per year during the dormant season, for each of the next three to four years. In this way, by the end of four years, all of the old canes will have been removed while new canes have had four years to become established and productive, providing continued harvest during the renovation process.

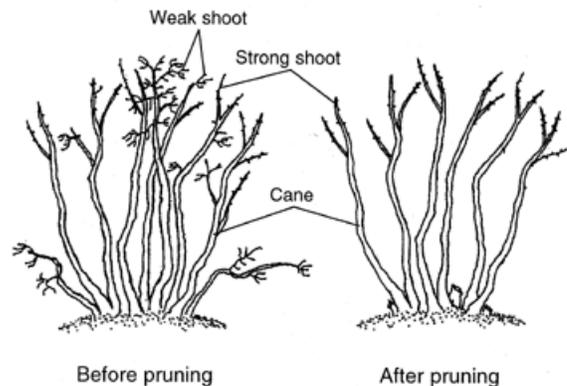


Figure 2. Dormant blueberry pruning