

## **Rabbiteye Blueberry Pruning Workshop**

Terra Freeman, Small Farms/ Alternative Enterprise Extension Agent  
terraf@coj.net (904)255-7450

### **Rabbiteye Blueberries**

- Great for local markets and u-pick operations because they do not require frost protection.
- Tend to be larger and more vigorous than southern highbush blueberries .
- There are many varieties of rabbiteye blueberries. Bloom intervals of most varieties overlap enough to ensure adequate cross-pollination. Planting two or more varieties for cross-pollination ensures fruit set and earlier ripening.

#### **Reasons to Prune:**

- Aides in establishment of young plants (balances top growth with root system, and limits fruit production).
- Aides in development of desirable plant size while increasing plant vigor; promotes growth of new fruiting wood; rejuvenates older wood.
- Enhances fruit quality and size while preventing over-fruiting.
- Reduces disease.
- Controls pests..
- Allows sunlight to reach interior portions of plant to encourage fruit production.

#### **Pruning during different stages of growth:**

##### **When transplanting young plants:**

- Remove 1/3 to 1/2 of canopy.
- Remove weak, twiggy growth near base of plant.
- Remove side branches bearing flower buds.
- Remove all flower buds during first year. If not, could result in delayed establishment and reduced canopy growth.

### **When pruning 2 year old plants before flowering and fruit set:**

- Remove diseased or damaged wood.
- Remove twiggy growth.
- Remove flowers from any weak plants.
- Continue to limit flower buds during second year in order to encourage overall plant establishment and to maximize future fruit production.

### **Around 5 years or more:**

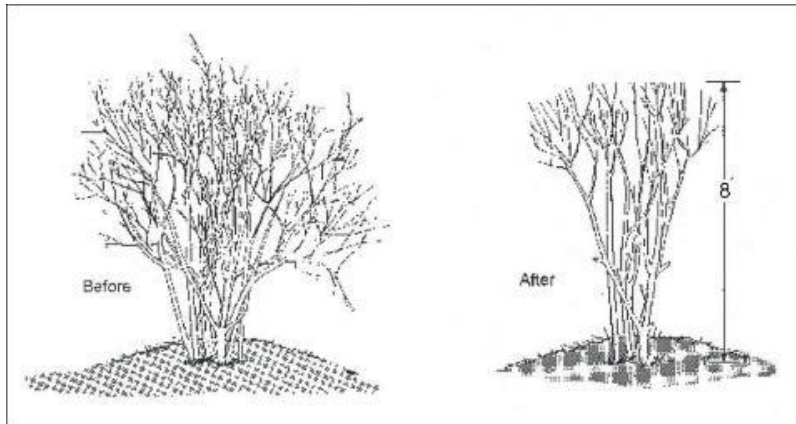
- Main pruning objective is selective cane renewal, in winter.
- Annual removal of 1 to 3 of the oldest canes before spring growth initiates will stimulate production of new canes.

## **Summer Pruning of Rabbiteye Blueberries**

- Prune ASAP after harvest.
- Fertilize a few weeks prior to summer pruning so plants will produce new growth quickly.
- Mechanical or hand hedge trimmer in summer to reduce height and to stimulate summer growth flush.
- Hedging and topping is main purpose, but okay to do as much detail pruning as possible with pruners.
- Okay to combine moderate summer pruning with selective cane renewal.
- Alternate- year summer pruning may result in higher yields than annual pruning because new growth from summer pruning will produce flower buds for next year's crop.
- Remove 25%- 30% or  $\frac{1}{4}$  of canopy volume so you don't reduce next year's crop
- Cut back overly vigorous shoots to desirable height.
- Top vigorous canes to stimulate branching and flower bud formation.
- Light topping after harvest will help maintain desired canopy height.
- Ex: If plant is 8ft, prune to 5ft; if 8ft to 10ft, prune to 6ft.

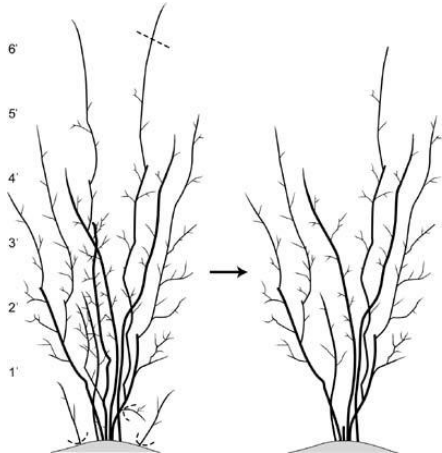
## **Winter Pruning of Rabbiteye Blueberries**

- After coldest weather has passed and flower buds have begun to develop; avoid pruning too early in winter so you don't accidentally stimulate growth.
- Main objective is selective cane removal. Remove 1-3 of the oldest canes.
- Also remove thin, twiggy (matchstick) wood because it produces smaller fruit; leave larger diameter (pencil size) wood .
- Pruning may result in fewer, but larger fruits.
- A good pruning this year could result in requiring a lighter pruning next year
- Experience and variety will determine fine details of pruning.
- Canes can be removed from zero inches up to two feet from ground.  
This pruning method will result in total bush renewal over a five year period.



Once established, rabbiteye blueberries require little pruning until they have reached 6 to 8 feet tall. Once they have reached this size, a cane-renewal pruning program should be initiated. This involves removing one to three of the largest canes each winter.

Cane renewal of rabbiteye blueberries 6 feet and taller. Remove one to three of the oldest, tallest canes each winter or about 20 percent of the canopy. In addition, excessively tall canes can be pruned back to 6 to 8 feet.



**Southern Highbush Blueberries**

- Need frost protection
- Usually grown by large commercial growers because produce earlier berries to sell further north; first crops to market yield higher price.

**Summer Pruning**

- Prune in early June, because harvest in May.
- In June, remove 30% of canopy on mature plant.
- Should already be pruned by now, but if not, just remove 6 in off top now.

**Winter Pruning**

- Remove 1-3 older canes.

## Two basic types of pruning cuts:

Each type of cut has its own purpose and results in a different growth response in the plant.

- **Heading cuts:**
  - Usually performed on one-year-old wood.
  - Used to stimulate growth of new fruiting wood, limit height and width, and adjust crop load. .
  - Performed by cutting the terminal of a shoot back to a lateral bud.
  - Stimulates growth of lateral vegetative buds along the shoot, just below the cut.
  - Use mechanical or hand pruners.
  
- **Thinning cuts:**
  - Consists of complete removal of a shoot or cane at or near its origin.
  - Purpose is to get rid of older canes that are less productive and to stimulate production of new canes.
  - Used to thin out dense canopies to allow for better air circulation and light and spray penetration.
  - Use hand loppers, pneumatic loppers, or pruning saws.

### Disinfect pruners with solution of:

- 10% household bleach (1 part bleach to 9 parts water). Soak the tools for 30 minutes and rinse with water.
  
- 70% to 90% solution of rubbing or denatured alcohol. Wipe or soak. No need to rinse.

Tools should be kept sharp for easier cutting and to avoid injuring surrounding tissue.

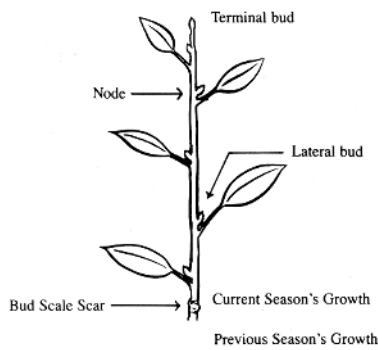
The following is a link to a publication on how to sharpen tools:

<http://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/IR/00/00/33/18/00001/EP37900.pdf>

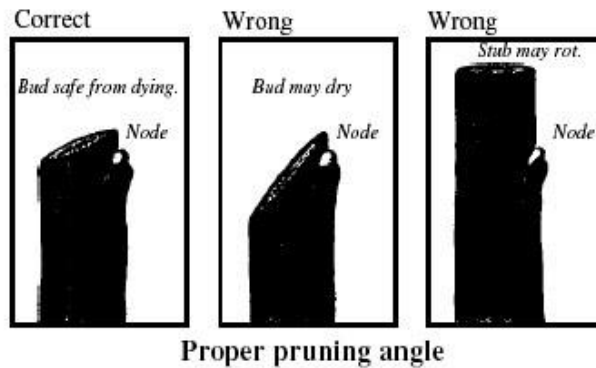
## How to perform the 2 basic types of pruning cuts:

**Heading cuts:** Prune 1/4 inch above the bud, sloping down and away from it. Stimulates growth of buds closest to the cut. The direction in which the top remaining bud is pointing will determine the direction of new growth. Use to reduce shrub size.

### Parts of a stem

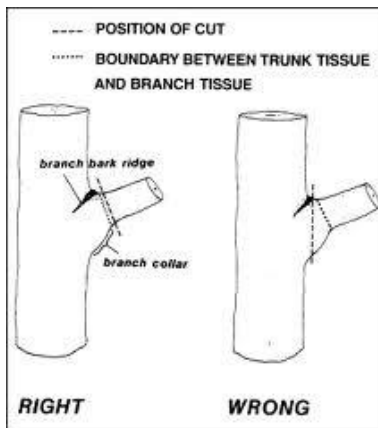


### Examples of Heading Cuts:



**Thinning cuts** remove branches at their points of origin or attachment (main trunk or to the ground). Make thinning cuts just above parent or side branches. Use to reduce shrub density without stimulating regrowth.

### Thinning cut:



Heading and thinning cuts have different effects on subsequent growth.

## Types of Pruners:

**Hand pruners:** Use to cut stems up to 3/4 inches in diameter. Two types of hand pruners:

- Bypass pruners: sharpened, curved, scissors-type blades that overlap. Recommended.
- Anvil pruners: Anvil pruners have straight upper blades that cut against flat lower plates. Tend to crush stems as they cut, so not recommended.

**Lopping shears (Loppers):** Use to cut through branches that are up to 1 3/4 inches in diameter. Have long handles to give you extra reach and better cutting leverage.

**Pruning saws:** Use to remove stems you cannot cut with hand pruners or lopping shears. Come in many sizes with either straight or curved blades, and teeth that are either fine or coarse. Use a finely-toothed, curved pruning saw to remove branches up to 2 1/2 inches in diameter. Use a coarsely-toothed saw for heavy branches 3 inches or more in diameter.

## References:

Pruning Blueberry Plants in Florida J.G. Williamson, F.S. Davies, P.M. Lyrene<sup>2</sup>  
<http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/430/430-459/430-459.html>  
<http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/430/430-459/430-459.html>  
<http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/430/430-455/430-455.html>  
[http://www.cypressisles.org/ci\\_pruning.html#anchor102410](http://www.cypressisles.org/ci_pruning.html#anchor102410)  
<http://www.extension.org/pages/29241/pruning-blueberry-bushes>

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information, and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions, or affiliations. USDA,, UF/IFAS Extension,, FAMU, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 286.26, F.S., persons needing accommodations or an interpreter to participate in the proceeding should notify the University of Florida Duval County Extension Service no later than 5 days prior to the meeting at (904)387-8850 or 1-800-955-8771 (TDD).