
Living Homegrown Podcast – Episode 97 Growing Blueberries

Show Notes are at: www.LivingHomegrown.com/97

Theresa: This is the Living Home Grown Podcast, episode number 97.

Announcer: Welcome to the Living Homegrown Podcast where it's all about how to live farm fresh without the farm. To help guide the way to a more flavorful and sustainable lifestyle is your host National PBS TV Producer and canning expert, Theresa Loe.

Theresa: Hey there, everybody. Welcome to the Living Homegrown Podcast. I'm your host, Theresa Loe, and this podcast is where we talk about living farm fresh without the farm. That's where we talk about preserving the harvest, small space food growing and other simple ways that you can live a more sustainable lifestyle. As always, if you want to dive deep into any of these topics or learn more about my canning academy or any of the other things I have cooking up, just visit my website, livinghomegrown.com. Well, today, I am diving into a topic with a very special guest. We are going to talk about blueberries. The reason I'm covering this topic is for whatever reason I have been getting a lot of questions about blueberries over the last year. A lot of people want to grow blueberries. They're a little unsure about all the pH requirements because blueberries like to grow in acidic soil, and maybe they don't have acidic soil. They don't know what to do. Maybe they've tried growing blueberries, but haven't been successful. I brought on an expert today, and we are going to talk to Lee Reich.

He has written so many of the greatest gardening books. Some of my favorites, but he's also a blueberry expert. He's going to come on and talk about all the different types of blueberries that we can grow, the different steps that we would need to take to adjust our soil, how to get the best possible blueberries that we can, how to water, mulch, feed, prune and protect our blueberries. He's going to tell us a trick to knowing when our blueberries are ready to harvest. I know this is something that you guys are going to enjoy. Who is Lee Reich? Well, let me tell you. Lee has a PhD in horticulture. He dove into gardening over 40 years ago initially with one foot in academia as an agricultural scientist with the USDA and Cornell University and one foot in the field, the organic field. He eventually expanded his field to a farmden which is more than a garden, but less than a farm. I'll let him explain that when he comes on, but he left academia to lecture, consult and to write.

He is the author of several really popular and very, very well-respected books,

including a Northwest Gardener's Year, Uncommon Fruits for Every Garden, The Pruning Book, Weedless Gardening, Landscaping with Fruit and Growing Fruit Naturally. Now, I have several of his books, and every single one is all marked up, has dog ears and little finger dirt marks on them because I use them a lot. They're all great. His syndicated column for the Associated Press appears by-monthly in newspapers from coast to coast. His farmden which is his property where he grows all of his fruit has been featured in Martha Stewart Living and the New York Times. Besides proving a year-round supply of fruits and vegetables, the farmden has an educational mission. It's basically a test site for all of his innovative techniques in soil care, pruning and food production. Basically, his backyard is his laboratory. Science and an appreciation of natural systems underpin all of his work. His goal is to get more people whether in their backyards or in small farms to grow more food sustainably and organically, which I know you guys are totally into.

Lee lives in New York, but he can talk to how to grow blueberries anywhere in the country. Now, I want you to keep in mind that everything that Lee talks about will be in the show notes for this episode. Links to his website, his books and some of the information on how to prune blueberries will all be in the show notes. You can just go there and have everything in one place. To get to the show notes, you go to livinghomegrown.com/97. I'll have everything right there for you. Without further ado, let's talk to Lee Reich, the author of Growing Fruit Naturally and Uncommon Fruits for Every Garden.

Hey, Lee. Thanks so much for coming on the show today.

Lee: Hi, Theresa. Glad to be here.

Theresa: Oh, good. Well, I just know everybody's going to be excited to hear this because for whatever reason, I've been getting a lot of questions about blueberries from my listeners and from my readers. I knew you were the blueberry guy. You're the fruit guy, but you're definitely the blueberry guy.

Lee: Well, it is my favorite fruit.

Theresa: Oh, perfect. Well, you write about it so much. I should have known. Why don't we start though by you telling everybody a little bit about your background, what you do. I'm really interested also in how you went from having your PhD in horticulture to just specializing in fruit growing. What made you decide to do that? Why don't you give us a little background?

Lee: Well, that's an easy question because I really love to eat fruit. Actually, when I went from my PhD in horticulture, I actually was focusing on fruit for the PhD. For me research, for my dissertation was on blueberries.

Theresa: Perfect. You're the perfect person.

- Lee: I was very fortunate. I was working at the big USDA Beltsville Research Center where I was able to do my research for the degree. They were trying to expand the areas where blueberries could be grown. I was studying, more specifically, the soil requirements of blueberries.
- Theresa: Oh, well, that makes sense. No wonder you're always ... Because you always were writing about blueberries. Now I know it's your favorite but also that that's what you got your PhD in. No wonder.
- Lee: Yes. The only thing I like about blueberries is they are, first of all, one of the few Native American fruits. They're pretty easy to grow. I mean there are no fail. I grow a lot of different fruits because I like fruits, and in all the years I've been growing fruits, there have been some years where there's been a drought. There's been 17-year cicadas. There's been too much rain, late frost. All these things that affect a lot fruit production. I've never ever not had a full crop of blueberries.
- Theresa: Wow. Well, I know you have a special ... I kept calling it a pavilion, but you call it a gazebo. We'll talk about that when we start, when we talk about the harvest. I also would love for you to explain to everybody what you call your property. You don't call it a farm. What do you call it?
- Lee: I call it a farmden.
- Theresa: Yes.
- Lee: Which hybrids the word garden and farm because it's more than a garden in what I'm growing and less than a farm.
- Theresa: That's fantastic. That's fantastic. Well, you've written a lot of books, and I was telling you before we started is that you can always tell a good book because it will be all dog-eared and tagged and has little dirt smudges. All the books I have of yours are like that.
- Lee: Oh, thanks for defacing them.
- Theresa: Yes. Well, they're so good. That's why I'm so excited you could come on the show. I really love ... There's two of my favorites of yours is your book *The Uncommon Fruit for Every Garden* because it just covers so many unusual things like mulberries and Asian pears and even paw paws and all kinds of stuff. If anyone's at all interested in going into uncommon fruits, but also love your *Growing Fruit Naturally* because it's one I really recommend to people when they're just starting to get into fruit growing because it is a really good guide for beginners and intermediate and advanced. You cover a lot in that book, so thank you for writing all your wonderful books.

Lee: Oh, well, thanks for the kind words. I mean one thing is I started. I didn't grow up on a farm or in agriculture, namely. Even though it was a long time ago now, I can still remember when I knew nothing. It helps with my writing because I can think of, well, if you're just starting, you got to present the basics.

Theresa: Yes. I think that that's why you're so good because a lot of times, people forget what it feels like to be a beginner. You covered the whole gamut, so that's why it's so good.

Lee: I get reminded of that because of my sisters. Some went into gardening, but she knows nothing, so she asked me questions a lot. I can just get right back to that. She probably wouldn't like to hear me say this.

Theresa: Yes, sisters don't like to be told they don't know anything.

Lee: Thank you for knowing nothing and asking me questions.

Theresa: Exactly. Well, I guess I know that one of the biggest things that throw people off is the PH, but we'll talk about that in a minute. Where I would really love to start is if we could start with the big picture of the different types of blueberries that are available, so that people understand that there's a blueberry for every size garden. Could you explain the different types for us?

Lee: Yes, not only for every size garden but pretty much in the whole country. It's possible to grow blueberries, which is also nice. The most common ones, the one you see in the supermarket or generally what are known as high bush blueberries which are native throughout the east about as far west as Michigan. Then, there's been ... I don't know if I can remember now if it's a subspecies. I think it's the same species. It might be a subspecies, what are called southern high bush. When you get too far south, they don't have enough winter to make the high bush complete its life cycle, so there's a whole bunch of southern high bush varieties also. Those are the ones you see in the supermarket usually, except when you buy canned blueberries, say, for blueberry pie. Those are known as low bush blueberries which are mostly harvested in main, but they grow wild, a lot of different places. Also, I'm using the common names. There's actually a number of ... You know, low bush means that it's low-growing.

There's a number of low-growing blueberries besides the common one which is *Vaccinium angustifolium* which usually the commercial one, but there are other ones that could be a favorite in certain regions. Then, there's another species that's commonly grown or less commonly grown but sometimes grown or hybridized for its fruit. That's native to the southeast. It's called rabbiteye blueberry. I guess because the fruit looks like rabbit eyes. Those grow on very large bushes. High bush blueberry grows about six, seven, eight feet tall. Low bush, about one or two feet tall. Rabbiteye can get up to even 15 feet tall.

- Theresa: I did not know it got so big.
- Lee: To me though, the best tasting of all are the high bush blueberries. Oh and high bush has been hybridized. The genes have been mixed around a lot, but this so-called hybrids between high bush and low bush which are called half-highs. They're medium in size.
- Theresa: They would be more like four to five-foot?
- Lee: Yes. Oh, one significant difference between the low bush and the other ones is that the low bush spread by underground runners. I use them, actually, as a ground cover on part of my property. Farmden, I mean. I planted them, and then they spread to fill in the area completely.
- Theresa: Fantastic. Now, you were saying pretty much everyone in the whole country can grow blueberries. Is there pretty much a high bush or low bush for just about anywhere?
- Lee: Well, the main thing to consider is what's called chill requirements because plants of climates where there's winter need a certain amount of cool weather in order to complete their life cycle. Different varieties need different amounts of cool weather. In Los Angeles which doesn't get very cold in winter, you would probably have to grow the southern high bush types.
- Theresa: Okay.
- Lee: The low bush are the ones that grow further north.
- Theresa: Got it, okay.
- Lee: Then, you have high bush. Then, you have southern high bush. Then, you have rabbiteye. I guess possibly rabbiteye in Los Angeles area too.
- Theresa: Now, is there a certain blueberry that you consider to have the very best flavor?
- Lee: Well, I have to say that I grow maybe 10 or more different varieties. The reason I do that is to spread the season, because they ripen at different times. They differ, obviously, in size. Maybe even a little on color. Oh, I'm talking all about the high bush because I do consider them to be the best tasting.
- Theresa: Okay.
- Lee: They don't differ that much in flavor. I'm saying if you harvest it just at the right moment, so I would say there might be one or two that maybe sometimes, I think, taste a little better. There's a variety called Jersey which is the one that

most stands out for me. Of all the ten or more varieties I grow, they're all great tasting.

Theresa: Okay. Now, that's a really good point that you brought about the early, mid and late. That is how I know you get such a long harvest. We will be talking about harvest when we're talking about competing with birds and animals and things, but is that probably what you would suggest if people have the space to grow some early, some mid and some late, so that they can have a long season?

Lee: Yes. Sometimes people ask me. They say they have room for four blueberry bushes. Which variety should they grow? I say, "Why grow just one variety? Unless you're away in the summer, why grow just one variety? You could spread out." For instance where I am, and this is a fairly cold region in New York's Hudson Valley. We start the harvest, sometimes, end of June. Definitely early July. With sequential harvesting of different varieties, it continues into early September.

Theresa: Wow, that's a long harvest.

Lee: So it kind of spreads it out. The other reason that I tell them to plant more than one variety is blueberries are partially self-fertile which means they will set fruit without cross pollination, but they're only partially self-fertile. If you plant two different varieties so they can cross pollinate, you get more and larger berries.

Theresa: Ah, that's important.

Lee: If you can plant more than one bush, I don't see any reason to plant just one variety.

Theresa: Yes, that sounds good. Okay. Well, I know what hangs people up the most is the pH requirement of the soil. Let's talk about that. Because I know that's where the biggest questions that I get. When you're talking about wanting to grow some blueberries, and you may or may not know what your soil is to begin with, what should someone do if they have a spot that they want to grow blueberries in their backyard?

Lee: Well, the first thing they should do is have a soil test, which might sound like something very technological, but basically, you just dig a hole, about six inches deep. Take the sample and go ... if you have, go to your local cooperative extension office, or you could even buy a home soil pH testing kit and find out what the pH is. It's important to find out ahead of time. Of course, if you live somewhere where there's blueberries growing all over Rhododendrons or Azaleas or Mountain-laurel, then your pH is probably right. Then, you don't have to test it, but short of that, it's good to test it.

Theresa: Okay, so the first thing to do is to get a test so that we know. Then, what is the

pH range for most blueberries? What are we shooting for?

- Lee: Somewhere about 4 to 5.5 which is very acidic. Much more acidic than most other plants enjoy.
- Theresa: Yes, so if you are growing Rhododendron or you have those a lot in your area, you may have a more acidic soil. My soil is not acidic in Los Angeles. I grow, actually, my blueberries in pots.
- Lee: Generally, in the western areas of the country, the soil is naturally of more alkaline, not acidic. Generally in the northeast, there's a lot of soils that are acidic and same with the southeast, but just have a soil test just to make sure.
- Theresa: Okay, so we get a soil test and we find out what we're starting with. Then, what do we do?
- Lee: Then, you probably will have to ... I doubt that there's some place. There are very few places where the soil would be too acidic for them, so you mostly have to acidify the soil. A lot of people who know something about gardening talk about using various organic materials to acidify the soil like pine needles or oak leaves or peat moss. Things like that. That's actually a myth. All these things initially might drop the pH of the soil to make it more acidic. Then over time, it goes back up to neutral. There's only one good way to acidify the soil, and that's to add sulfur which is a naturally mined mineral. It's just dug up, and you put it in your soil. The best sulfur to use is what's called pelletized sulfur. It looks like little yellow lentils. That's just because it makes it easier to spread. It's not dusty, so you have to add sulfur. The amount to add depends on what your pH is.
- Theresa: Yes, I know. I remember hearing you talk one time, and you were talking about how there's a ... You have a rule of thumb if someone has sandy soil versus clay soil, and they won't need to make a change of one unit like from five to four.
- Lee: Yes, so if you have a sandy soil, the recommendation is for three-quarters or a pound of sulfur for a hundred square feet for each pH unit you want to change in. If your pH is six, and say, you wanted to bring it down to four, then, you would add two times three-quarters which is a pound and a half of sulfur for every hundred square feet that the bushes will eventually spread. For heavier soil like a clay soil or lawn soil, it would be about two pounds of sulfur per hundred square feet for each one pH unit change.
- Theresa: Got it, got it, and so a hundred square feet, that's ten by ten. An area ten by ten.
- Lee: Yes.
- Theresa: Then, you just spread it on the soil, and you dig it in a little bit or no?

- Lee: What I do is just if you're just planting a little plant, you could just spread it on top of the soil. Then, when you dig the plant in the hole, it will get mixed in with the planting hole and have its effect right on the roots immediately. By the time it would start to spread beyond the planting hole, the effect of the sulfur that you spread on top of the ground will percolate it into the soil.
- Theresa: Fantastic.
- Lee: That's easy.
- Theresa: Yes, very easy. Now, about how often do you have to redo that?
- Lee: Well, it depends on your soil.
- Theresa: And how much rain you have and things like that.
- Lee: Yes. I would say the most important thing is to keep an eye on the growth. If the soil becomes too alkaline or not sufficiently acidic, the blueberry's leaves get what's called a chlorosis, which means the youngest leaves turn yellow. At first, they turn yellow and the veins in the leaves stay green. Then, they'll turn totally yellow. Then, they'll die and fall off. That's actually from iron deficiency because iron is not available to blueberry roots if the soil is not sufficiently acidic. The way you cure that is not by adding iron. You just make the soil more acidic. Yes, so the first thing you do is to keep an eye on the leaves if you see that, but you really don't want the plants to get to that point. Ideally, maybe check the pH every couple of years or so. Then, after a few years, you'll have a hand on how often it needs to be added.
- Theresa: Great. I remember you saying also that blueberries like infertile soil. That was a real surprise for me. Could you explain that?
- Lee: Yes, they grow relatively ... In the wild, they typically grow. For instance where I live, there's mountains right nearby, and you often see high bush blueberries in the mountains and tons of low bush. They typically grow where leaf litter has collected in crevices, and then just routed down. They'll just be growing in this type of environment. You have very high organic matter, but not very rich soil. Things that make blueberries grow well or has a low pH soil that's very rich in organic matter, but not necessarily super fertile, and then adequate moisture and air in the soil.
- Theresa: Okay. Now, that brings me to sun because in the wild, they maybe could grow in a shaded area, but you grow yours in full sun. Is that so that it has more fruit?
- Lee: Well, in the wild, they generally grow in shade or part shade, and they don't fruit that much. If you grow them in full sun, they'll fruit more, but if you grow

them in full sun, you have to make sure that they have ... You know, growing in the shade, they don't have this high water requirement. Growing them in the sun, you want to make sure that they have sufficient water. One way to make sure that they have sufficient water is to ... I remember I said also high organic matter is really good for them.

If they have plenty of organic matter on and in the soil, and the way to do that or the way I do it and the best way to do it is just to mulch them about two to three inches deep. That mulch has a lot of benefits. It breaks down, adds organic matter to the soil which helps soils hold moisture. It also keeps moisture from evaporating from the soil. The other great thing it does, it relates to PH, is that it buffers pH changes, so you don't have to ... After years, when the organic matter builds up, you don't have to be as precise with the pH then also. You get more wiggle room.

Theresa: Ah, okay. Now, so what kind of things do you like to use for your mulches?

Lee: I use any weed-free organic material. Basically over the years, I've used wood chips. I've used wood shavings. I've used sawdust. I've used autumn leaves. I've used pine needles, if they happen to be available. Basically whatever is available, and none of those things have weed seeds in them. Every year, I'll put down. Sometimes, people ask me whether you take off the old stuff before you put down the new stuff. The answer is no. I just on top of it, I put down two to three inches each year on top of the ground. I've grown blueberries for about 30 years in the same spot, so with all that rotting down of the organic material, when you pull it aside, the soil beneath is really unbelievable. It's just like this soft moist. Blueberries really love that.

Blueberries are very unique among plants in their root structure. First of all, they don't have root hairs. They just have increasingly fine roots. The second thing is 90% of blueberry roots are on the top six inches of the soil, so you really want to make that part of the soil good for them. It's easier to do. You just get the pH right, and then just every year, maintain that organic matter.

Theresa: You know, that makes a lot of sense since they are a forest plant. You're almost recreating that but with more sun.

Lee: Yes. That's the only fruit that I grow that I do irrigate.

Theresa: Okay, so do you do a dripper system on those?

Lee: Yes, I have those on drip irrigation.

Theresa: Okay.

Lee: some years, a lot of years, we'll have a drought. Not like out in California, but

we'll have a drought, but since the soil was so rich in organic matter and the soil was so spongy and soft and water-retentive, I thought, "Well, maybe I can just turn off the drip irrigation. The soil will hold enough moisture. For a number of years, I didn't turn it on, and everything was fine. Then, one year, it was really, really dry. We still got a crop, but more berries were dropping than usual before they were harvested. Now, I turned it back on.

Theresa: Oh, okay. When they're first starting out, I imagine you need to water a little bit more than you would in subsequent years.

Lee: Well, not a little more. It's more mandatory that you water these first years. I would say the first two years to get it established. At least the first two years to water regularly. Regularly, this is one of the things that I think people do most in gardening, sometimes wrong, is watering. They either do too much or too little. People, it's like a formula, so I say for blueberries, if you have say a potted plant that came in a half gallon of pot which is the usual size. I'd say for the first year, you should add one gallon once a week throughout the growing season. Then, you increase it as the years go on.

Theresa: Okay. That's a good place to start. Perfect. All right. Well, now once we have our plants growing, and they're in full sun and we're giving them some water, what about feeding? I know you said that they like infertile soil, so what do we do for feeding of our blueberries?

Lee: Well, pretty much with all that organic material that you add to the soil, the only nutrient that probably would be lacking would be nitrogen. For years, what I've done is I've used an organic source of nitrogen, soybean meal, which is really ... A lot of people go for special acid plant fertilizers which would work fine, but there's an advantage to using an organic fertilizer. The advantage of soybean meal is soybean meal, the nitrogen is locked up in the particles of the soybean that's been ground up. It's the action of microorganisms which respond to heat and moisture that start breaking down the soybean meal to release the nitrogen. As the nitrogen gets released, it starts out as proteins in the soybean meal. Then, it becomes amino acids. Then, it becomes ammonium ion. Then in most soils, it will become nitrate ion.

It turns out that blueberries really like their nitrogen in the form of ammonium. Then, as acid soils, the bacteria that change ammonium to nitrate are missing, so it's like a perfect system. You have this slow release from breakdown of proteins to ammonium ion which blueberries like. The other nice thing about it, the release is key to both moisture and warmth. Blueberry growth is also key to moisture and warmth, so the more blueberries grow, the more nitrogen is release, and t's like a slow release. A lot of times, if you read recommendations, they'll talk about, "Sprinkle a little fertilizer in the beginning of the season. Halfway through, do again." Just once a year, I put down soybean meal. I typically use about a pound and a half per hundred square feet. I just sprinkle it

on the ground in late fall just before I put the mulch down in fall.

Theresa: Ah, that is really good because you're setting it down but it's cooler, so you don't have to worry about it getting wasted. It's not going to really kick in until you get the warmth and the microorganisms, yes.

Lee: Right, exactly. The microorganisms will stay dormant. You know, I have to add one thing to that though. The way you know if you're doing everything right is you look at the growth of blueberries, because they'll bear fruit on stems that are one year old growing up in the plant. Some people just take a blueberry plant, just take in the front lawn and then wonder why they don't get any yield. That's because each year's growth is only maybe two inches. They can't have that many fruit on two inches of stem. What you do is you look to see how much growth you get. If you're getting a foot and a half, plus or minus maybe a foot and a half to, say, two feet of growth each season. That's a good amount of growth. It turns out that after years of using the soybean meal, I've noticed that I've been getting three or four feet of growth sometimes.

Just this past year, I've decided to not use the soybean meal and to see maybe I don't need it anymore, because adding all that organic matter does slowly build up the reserves of nitrogen in the soil also, once again, really slowly. The important thing is we need to keep an eye on the growth. How much growth do you get will be key to mostly in nitrogen and water. Leaf color will be key to acidity. You keep an eye on that and make adjustments as needed.

Theresa: You know, this is also why it's so important to feed organically. My listeners do because they're very into organics and natural growing, but this is so important because when you use something that is synthetic, it just gives that shock of nitrogen. Then, it disappears. What you're talking about here is something that will be in reserve and will only be available to the plant really when it needs it. The rest of the time, it's just sitting there. That's such a more natural, gentle way for the plant to grow without being shocked.

Lee: Yes, it's 100% right because like when you add these special acid plant fertilizers that you can buy in a garden center, what happens is the fertilizer, the whole amount is in the soil than right there. Maybe it will shock the plant. Maybe it will get washed out of the soil. That's why typically, add a little now and then a little later, not to put too much in the soil once, but it's so much easier. Just once a year, you put down the organic form.

Theresa: Yes. Now, you buy the soybean meal at the feed store, right?

Lee: Right.

Theresa: When you go in there, they must think you have a bunch of animals.

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- Lee: Right. They think I'm raising pigs, or those sorts of things.
- Theresa: That's a great place to get it. If you have a feed store that you can just buy bags of it there.
- Lee: Right. There's other organic nitrogen sources. There's cotton seed meals. Some people use alfalfa meal. Mostly, any sort of meal is more concentrated, so that would be a more concentrated source of nitrogen, but I like the idea, and I'll know this season of not even having to use that anymore. Just leaves. That's even more organic.
- Theresa: Right because you have such a layer there. You probably don't. I've always used cotton seed meals, so I'm glad to know that you still think that's good.
- Lee: Yes.
- Theresa: It works, all right. Once we have this going and we do our once a year feeding, which is so much easier. I love that you say that. It makes it so easy. Then, we have our plant growing, and I've heard you talk about, with the high bush, that we don't have to prune for the first few years. Could we talk a little bit about the pruning and maybe start with the high bush? What's the general rules for the pruning of the blueberries?
- Lee: Yes, so the high bush bares best on stems up to six years old. Basically, when a stem gets to be six years old, you cut it down to the ground. As a shrub, what shrubs do, this makes them shrubs. They're always setting up new growths from ground level, so basically, the pruning, once a bush is six years old, you cut away stems that are six years old. You think out, so there's not too many new shoots, because when they get older, then, they'll be too crowded. People sometimes ask me that. "How do you know when a shoot's six years old?" I tell them I take a magic marker. No, I don't do that.
- Theresa: I know you don't do that.
- Lee: Anyway, the stem, if it's more than an inch thick, it's probably over six years old. It doesn't have to be that exacting.
- Theresa: Okay.
- Lee: Basically, I just cut out a few of the oldest stems, thin out a few of the younger stems. Then, go within the bush. Anything that looks overcrowded, crossing branches or things that are arching too close to the ground, then I cut those off or cut them back. That's it.
- Theresa: Okay. All right. I know you have pictures. In your books, you talk about this with photographs, but I know you also have information on your website. I'll be sure

to link to everything. What if you decide that you want to grow a low bush?
What do you with the pruning for those?

Lee: Low bush fruits best on stems that are one and two years old. The way you can prune those, a lot of people ... In the forest, they're not pruned at all, obviously, but they don't bare that much. The way that you can prune them is after the bush has been growing for two years, you cut the whole thing down to ground, right to the ground. Then, the following season, it will grow, but those new stems won't bear fruit. The season after that, those stems will bear fruit. The season after that, they can bear fruit again. You cut them down again. Every third year, you just cut the whole planting down. If you don't want to miss out on a crop ever, you can divide the plant in half and then do half the planting. Half of them staggered.

Theresa: Oh, that's a good idea. Yes, so you could cut some to the ground and some not to the ground.

Lee: Right.

Theresa: Ah, that would be the way to go, absolutely.

Lee: Yes, or you can just ... If it's more minor grown, partially for decoration and partially for fruit, so I just go in with the pruning shears and cut some of the biggest ones down all the way. When you cut them, it's good to cut them all the way down and then leave some of the other ones, so it really fruits continuously to some degree.

Theresa: Now, is the pruning about the same for the rabbiteye? Do you prune it like a high bush, or do you prune it like a low bush?

Lee: It's more like the high bush.

Theresa: Okay, so the same thing. In six years, you would be cutting out the biggest canes?

Lee: I have to admit I'm not exactly sure if it's six years again or maybe it's seven or maybe it's five. I'm not sure.

Theresa: Okay. Oh, that's okay.

Lee: The principle would be the same where you want to see how when the stem becomes unproductive ...

Theresa: Then you take it out.

Lee: Actually, in rabbiteye, there would be another consideration. If it gets to be 15

feet tall, it doesn't matter if it's productive. You won't be able to reach it, so I would it prune it like a high bush to keep it from getting too tall.

Theresa: Yes. Well, most people grow high or low anyway.

Lee: Yes.

Theresa: Yes. Well, let's talk a little bit about the harvest, because that's the best part. I always have called your ... You have this way that you cover your blueberries, and I was calling it a pavilion, but you actually, I think you call it a gazebo, don't you?

Lee: A lot of people, the way they protect them from the birds, the first thing to do is you decide. Are you going to share with the birds? Then, also think about are the birds going to share with you? Where I am and a lot of places, the birds will not share which is fine because I won't share with the birds either. What I did, what a lot of people do is they just drape a net over their plants. That's easy, but it's hard to harvest that way. The birds don't find it that hard to get into underneath the net. What I did is I built a, what I used to call a blueberry cage, as permanent bird proof walls. Then, during the growing season, I cover the top with bird proof net also. Blueberry cage doesn't sound all that decorative, and I do like it to be decorative too. Then, I was thinking maybe I should call it a blueberry gazebo or blueberry pavilion.

Every year, I do the workshop at my farmden, and often, I'll do a blueberry workshop. When I do the blueberry workshop, I'm the only one that goes into the pavilion. Everybody else has to stand outside, so somebody suggested that I should call it the blueberry temple. Only the anointed ones are allowed in, so give it a good name, and it will look pretty. Actually, mine looks quite nice because I used rough locust posts for the upright. I have rebar along the top to keep holding that permanent side nets up. It looks very somewhat festive.

Theresa: Yes, and it has a really cute gate. You made a darling gate for it. It keeps the deer out and some of the other critters.

Lee: Birds are the main thing that I keep out.

Theresa: Tell everybody, because you have, I think ... Don't you have 16 bushes in there. How many quarts of blueberries do you get a year on average?

Lee: All right, so we have 16 plants. It's about 10 different varieties. As I said, the harvest goes from early summer to the end of summer almost. From that, the 16 plants, we keep careful records of this, so it's about 190 quarts from 16 plants, which is a very good yield.

Theresa: Yes, I would say.

- Lee: We eat about half. People say, "What do you do with all those blueberries?" I eat them. We freeze half of them and eat fresh the other half and basically have blueberries all year round, fresh or frozen.
- Theresa: That's so great. That is so great.
- Lee: I'm a living experiment in what happens if you ...
- Theresa: If you eat too much fruit?
- Lee: If you eat that many blueberries.
- Theresa: Yes, well ...
- Lee: I never get tired of them.
- Theresa: No. No, they're so good. Of all the 16, is there one particular one that you just ... I know you said Jersey. Is that your favorite?
- Lee: Possibly, but I would have to say any one of them is my favorite because I really do love all of them, but Jersey might have a slight edge.
- Theresa: Great. Well, is there any other parting words of wisdom you'd like to give us about blueberries?
- Lee: Yes. Very important, harvesting them. Blueberries turn blue before they're actually totally ripe, because birds will eat them before they turn blue even. If you have a bunch of blueberries, how do you know the ripe blue ones from the unripe ones? The way you do it is you just gently tickle the bunch. The ripe ones will fall off into your hand. The flavor difference is really quite significant, because when they first turn blue, the flavor is not at its peak. It takes about three or so days before the flavor really ratchets up.
- Theresa: Ah, now, do they ripen after they're picked at all?
- Lee: No.
- Theresa: If you were to pick it early ... No? You have to really make sure that you're picking it at the right time, or you miss out on that flavor?
- Lee: Yes. That's a myth with a lot. Some fruits do ripen after they're picked, but that's a myth mostly, but a lot of people ... What happens when you pick certain fruits, they soften which does happen, and some of the carbohydrates turn from starchy carbohydrates to sugary carbohydrates, so they can become sweeter. I really liken it to more incipient rot rather than ripeness. Same with blueberries.

Theresa: Yes, that's not what we're going for.

Lee: Right, so blueberries, really, you pick them dead ripe which means they'll come off when you just tickle the bunches.

Theresa: Okay, that's a really good tip. I love that. Well, Lee, I cannot thank you enough for coming on the show today. This has been so great. Thank you very, very much. I know everyone's going to really want to run out and start growing blueberries. Hopefully, they will run out and grab your books too because they will direct them on everything that they need to do. Thanks for coming on.

Lee: Well, thanks for having me. Time went by very quickly.

Theresa: It did. Well, thank you.

I hope that that interview gave you a little bit of an inspiration to want to go out and add blueberries to your own backyard. Lee has a ton more information on his website and in his books, so I will have links in the show notes to everything that he talked about. All you have to do is go to livinghomegrown.com/97. I will have everything there for you. I hope you enjoyed that, and until next time, just try to live a little more locally, seasonally and homegrown. Take care, everybody.

Announcer: That's all for this episode of the Living Homegrown Podcast. Visit livinghomegrown.com to download Theresa's free canning resource guide and find more tips on how to live farm fresh without the farm. Be sure to join Theresa Loe next time on the Living Homegrown Podcast.

[BLOOPERS]