

BWSR Featured Plant

Name: Lowbush Blueberry (*Vaccinium augustifolium*)

Plant Family: Ericaceae



While naturally a short, understory species, *Vaccinium augustifolium* has been used to create many hybrid blueberries that run from tall to small. Even in the Midwest, many different cultivars can be found specifically bred for the climate and the best production of delicious fruits. These low maintenance plants are sturdy additions to the landscape, bringing great colors of white flowers in spring, light blue to dark blue fruits in summer, and red and orange leaves in fall. They are hardy to zone 2 and tolerant of salt and drought. With just two requirements, acidic soils and full sun, Lowbush blueberry establishes easily in many site conditions.

Statewide Wetland
Indicator Status:

- FACU



Bell shaped, white flowers

Identification

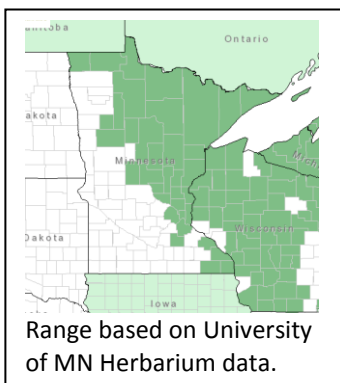
Growing to around two feet high, *Vaccinium augustifolium* is a small understory shrub with multiple branches spreading in angular forms. Young twigs are light green but become scaly grey-brown as they age. Older braches eventually die off after a few years and are replaced by younger branches. The leaves are simple and alternate, mostly stalkless and elliptic in shape. They are medium green, hairless and glossy with very finely serrated margins. The undersides of the foliage are only slightly paler than the top. Bell-like flowers develop over approximately three weeks (between May to June) on the preceding year's twigs, producing ¼ inch to ½ inch diameter fruits from July to early August. The powdery blue berries typically contain ten to twelve seeds which are spread by many waterfowl, songbirds and mammals.



Powdery blue berries ripen in July and August

Range

As a preferred berry of wildlife and humans alike, Lowbush blueberry is widespread across northern Minnesota's forested regions and is regularly grown and propagated commercially. The shrub grows well in many habitats including sand prairies, sandy savannas, sandy woodlands, rocky upland woodlands, rocky bluffs, pine barrens, and peatlands. Old fields or recently cleared lands in the vicinity of pines with soil pH ranging from 2.8 - 6.6 are favored. After fire or disturbance, deep rhizomes survive and resprout vigorously, expanding with exposure to full sun. Across the United States, this plant is found in the northeastern states from Virginia and Ohio up to Maine. It is also found in all eastern provinces of Canada, from Manitoba to Newfoundland.



Uses

Throughout Minnesota and the Great Lakes region, Lowbush blueberry is prized as part of many annual berry-pickings traditions for Native Americans, early Europeans, and today's locals and tourists. Pies, jams, wine and juice products, canned products and frozen foods all led to increased planting of the species. The fruit is readily eaten by a wide variety of birds and mammals and is a favorite of black bears. The flower buds are a nectar and pollen source for andrenid bees, bumblebees, and honey bees. A variety of beetles feed on the stems and foliage, like the rhododendron stem borer and the dogwood twig borer, and caterpillars such as the brown elfin and Henry's elfin use the developing berries and flowers for nutrition. Due to its speedy recovery, this species has strong potential for use in restoration projects after disturbance or fire damage. The shallow spreading rhizomes aid in preventing soil erosion and assist in slope stabilization.

Primary Uses:

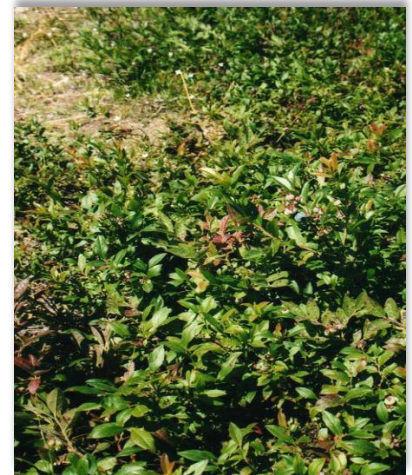
- Food Source
- Habitat
- Ornamental
- Pollinators
- Restoration

Planting Recommendations

Lowbush blueberry can be planted by seed, containerized plants, or by cuttings. If propagating by seed, collect the seed in fall from mature fruit. Seeds will then need stratification for 60 – 90 days at 41 °F. Germination will occur when temperatures are increased to 70 °F under sixteen hours of light per day. Stratification and pretreatment with gibberellin can speed up germination. For each berry, usually thirty to fifty percent of the seeds are viable. With proper storage, they can remain viable for up to 12 years.

Planting Methods

- Seed
- Cuttings
- Containerized Plants



Spreading growth form of Lowbush blueberry

Similar Species

Nearly identical in growth form and habitat, the Velvet-leaf blueberry (*Vaccinium myrtilloides*) is easily mistaken for the Lowbush blueberry, (and vice versa). However, as the name suggests, the two species differ in the leaf textures. The Velvet-leaf blueberry leaves are soft, hairy and lacks leaf margin serrations. The Lowbush blueberry on the other hand has mostly hairless leaves.



Hairs on the underside of the leaf on Velvet-leaf blueberry



The upper leaf surface of Velvet-leaf blueberry

References

Trees and Shrubs of Minnesota, by Welby R. Smith

Minnesota Wildflowers: <https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info/shrub/lowbush-blueberry>

Illinois Wildflowers: http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/savanna/plants/lb_blueberry.html

US Forest Service: <http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/shrub/vacang/all.html>

University of Minnesota Extension: <http://www.extension.umn.edu/garden/yard-garden/fruit/blueberries-for-home-landscapes/>