

FROM THE FILES OF THE DIRT DIVA DIARIES

# First-Year Shopping Checklist

Everything you need for a nursery-pro start — and what to leave on the shelf.

**Before you shop:** Test your soil pH first! Your test results determine how much sulfur and amendment you need. Most County Extension offices run a professional soil test for \$10–25, or grab a home pH test kit as your very first purchase.

## The Plants

- Blueberry bushes (minimum 2 different varieties)** 2-3 plants  
Choose varieties that match your USDA Zone and have overlapping bloom times. See the Variety Picker chart for pairings. Even "self-fertile" types produce up to 30% more with a buddy.
- Companion plants (optional but smart)** 1-2 plants  
Lavender, Borage, or Bee Balm to attract pollinators. Azaleas or Rhododendrons share the same acidic soil needs — great neighbors.

## Soil Testing & Amendment

- Soil pH test kit or meter** 1  
A basic probe meter or chemical test kit works. Or send a sample to your County Extension office for a complete analysis (\$10–25).
- Elemental Sulfur (granular)** 5-10 lb bag  
The ONLY safe way to lower soil pH for blueberries. Apply 6–12 months before planting if possible. Rate: ~1 lb/100 sq ft (sandy) to ~2 lbs/100 sq ft (clay) per pH point.
- Peat Moss or Coco Coir** 1-2 bales  
Mix into planting hole to improve drainage and acidity. Peat (pH ~3.5–4.5) is the classic choice. Coco Coir is a sustainable alternative but is pH-neutral — add extra sulfur if using it.
- Composted pine bark (finely shredded)** 2-3 cu ft  
Mix into soil to improve drainage and long-term acidity. Also excellent as mulch.
- Acidic potting mix (container growers only)** 1 bag per pot  
Look for Azalea/Camellia/Rhododendron blend. Peat-based mixes maintain pH 4.5–5.5 naturally. Never use "Garden Soil" or "Topsoil" — too heavy.

## Watering

- Soaker hose or drip irrigation kit** 1 per row  
Delivers water directly to the soil — not the leaves. Prevents fungal diseases. Overhead sprinklers are not recommended.
- Watering can or garden hose with soft nozzle** 1  
For spot-watering new transplants and containers. Goal: 1.5–3 inches per week. Use the "Finger Test" (2 inches deep) to check moisture.

## Fertilizer

- Ammonium-based acidic fertilizer** 1 bag  
Look for Ammonium Sulfate, Urea, or a blended "Azalea / Rhododendron / Blueberry" formula. Apply at bud swell (spring) and again 6 weeks later. Half-rate for young plants.
- Epsom Salts (magnesium sulfate)** 1 small bag  
Keep on hand for magnesium deficiency (red leaves between green veins). 1 tbsp per gallon of water as a soil drench.
- Chelated Iron (liquid)** 1 bottle  
Emergency "quick fix" for yellow leaves with green veins (iron chlorosis) while sulfur works long-term. A specially formulated iron that roots can absorb even when pH isn't perfect yet.

## Mulch

- Pine bark, pine needles, or shredded oak leaves** 2-4 bags  
Apply 2–4 inches deep out to the drip line. Keep mulch a few inches away from the trunk. Pine materials maintain acidity as they decompose. Avoid dyed mulches.

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Protection, tools, and the "Do Not Buy" list.

## 🛡️ Plant Protection

- Bird netting** 1 roll  
The ONLY 100% effective way to protect ripe fruit. Build a PVC or wood frame to hold netting off the branches so birds can't peck through. Secure at the ground.
- Frost blankets or burlap** 1-2  
Drape over bushes to protect spring blooms from late frost. Also used to wrap bushes for winter wind protection. Never use plastic — it traps cold and cooks plants in sun.
- Floating row covers (lightweight fabric)** 1  
Drape in early spring to add 5°-10°F of warmth around buds. Speeds up bud development and protects early blossoms from surprise frosts.
- Copper-based fungicide spray** 1 bottle  
Apply in fall (leaf drop) and early spring (before buds open) to prevent bacterial blight. Also helps against fungal issues. Follow label rates.

## ✂️ Tools

- Sharp bypass pruning shears** 1 pair  
For removing small branches, dead wood, and first-year flower buds. Clean between cuts to prevent disease spread.
- Loppers (for mature bushes)** 1 pair (later)  
You won't need these until year 3-4, but keep them on your radar for removing thick, old canes during renewal pruning.
- Shallow harvest containers** 2-3  
Wide, flat containers prevent berries from crushing under their own weight. Don't pile them deep. A baking sheet or flat Tupperware works too.
- Garden journal or notebook** 1  
Record pH tests, bloom dates, variety reviews, pruning notes, and harvest amounts. Your most valuable long-term tool.

## 💡 Optional / Indoor Growers

- Large container (18-24" diameter, 18" deep minimum)** 1 per plant  
Use fabric "smart pots" or containers with drainage holes. Too-small pots are the #1 cause of container failure.
- LED grow light (full spectrum)** 1  
Indoor blueberries need 12-14 hours of intense light. Place 6" above leaves. A sunny window alone is rarely enough.
- Humidity tray (pebble tray)** 1 per plant  
A tray filled with pebbles and water placed under the pot. Home heating dries air — this keeps humidity up around the leaves.
- Small paintbrush (for hand pollination)** 1  
No bees indoors! Gently brush pollen between all open flowers to act as a "surrogate bee."

## 🚫 The "Do Not Buy" List

- ✗ **Aluminum Sulfate** — Toxic to blueberry roots. It lowers pH but aluminum ions build up and kill plants. (Fine for hydrangeas, deadly for blueberries.)
- ✗ **Lime or Wood Ash** — Raises pH. The opposite of what you want. Keep away from your blueberry patch.
- ✗ **10-10-10 or general-purpose fertilizer** — Uses nitrate nitrogen that blueberries can't absorb. Use ammonium-based formulas only.
- ✗ **Uncomposted manure** — Alkaline and high in salts that burn blueberry roots and raise soil pH.
- ✗ **"Topsoil" or "Garden Soil" for containers** — Far too heavy. Compacts and suffocates roots. Use acidic potting mix only.
- ✗ **Plastic sheeting for frost protection** — Traps cold air and can cook plants when the sun hits. Use breathable fabric only.

## 💰 Money-Saving Tips

- ➕ **Free soil test:** Your County Extension office often runs soil clinics or offers discounted testing in spring.
- ➕ **Free mulch:** Shredded oak leaves, pine needles from your yard, or ask tree services for chipped pine — often free for the hauling.
- ➕ **Buy small:** A 1-gallon blueberry is half the price of a 3-gallon and catches up in 1-2 seasons with proper care.
- ➕ **Independent nurseries:** Staff know local conditions and carry varieties suited to your zone. Big-box stores often stock the wrong varieties for the region.
- ➕ **Rainwater collection:** Free, naturally acidic irrigation. Prevents hard tap water from slowly raising your soil pH.

## 📝 My Shopping Notes

My soil pH: \_\_\_\_\_ My Zone: \_\_\_\_\_ Budget: \$ \_\_\_\_\_