**Growing Huckleberries**

Huckleberries require a dormant winter period with temperatures around freezing. Avoid planting in a frost pocket.

In natural colonies, black huckleberries are usually found on well-drained, sandy loam soils that are formed from volcanic ash and that hold moisture well. Soils on productive wild sites nearly always contain large amounts of rotted wood and surface layers of forest duff. Huckleberries respond favorably to large amounts of soil organic matter (30% or more), and often root in rotted stumps and logs. On sites with poor soils or drainage, create raised beds using soil amended with peat moss, sawdust, bark, compost, and other organic materials. Huckleberries require acidic soils, the optimal soil pH for *V. deliciosum* and *V. membranaceum* being about 4.0 to 5.5 (7.0 is neutral).

**Transplanting huckleberries from the wild**

Black and Cascade huckleberries spread by underground stems called rhizomes. Most colonies consist of one to a few individual plants that produce many “bushes” from rhizomes. Transplanting wild *V. membranaceum* bushes is difficult because they lack dense, centralized root systems. What appears from the surface as a bush is often little more than a branch sticking up from an underground stem. *V.* *deliciosum* is also rhizomatous, but has a denser root system and transplants more easily. Collect dormant plants for transplanting from late fall through late winter. Dig a root ball large enough to fill a 3- to 5-gallon pot, disturbing the roots as little as possible. Do not prune the stems or branches. Use a peat moss-based potting soil to fill in around the root ball in the pot. Grow the huckleberries in pots for 1 to 2 years before transplanting them to a garden bed or field. Care for your containerized huckleberries as described in “Starting Huckleberries from Seed.”

**Starting huckleberries from cuttings**

*V. membranaceum* can be grown from rhizome cuttings. Stem cuttings usually root poorly, if at all. To start plants from rhizome cuttings, collect rhizomes in late winter or early spring. Cut the rhizomes into 4-inch-long pieces and bury them in sand placed in shallow nursery flats. Do not apply rooting compounds to the rhizomes. Place the flats into a misting bed or cover them with clear plastic film. Mist the sand with a spray bottle frequently enough to keep the cuttings moist. After the cuttings develop 1- to 2-inch-long roots and shoots, transplant them into 1-gallon nursery pots filled with a peat moss-based potting soil. Completely bury the rhizomes and roots while keeping the leaves exposed. Care of containerized huckleberries is described under “Starting Huckleberries from Seed.”

**Starting huckleberries from seed**

Both *V. deliciosum* and *V. membranaceum* can easily be grown from seed and begin flowering 2 to 5 years after sowing.

***Extracting seeds.*** Extract the seeds by squashing ripe berries through a finemesh kitchen strainer into a pan or dish tub. Spray or pour water through the pulp to wash the seeds through the strainer. The seeds are tiny and pass through most strainers readily. Strain off the skins and debris. Next, using two drinking glasses, pour the water and seeds from one glass to the other. After each transfer, allow the seeds to settle for several seconds, then pour off the dirty water, pulp, and floating seeds, which are not viable. Add more clean water and continue until all that remains are the heavy seeds at the bottom of the glass. Freshly extracted seeds may be planted immediately. To save seeds for later planting, spread them on a coffee filter and allow them to dry for 1 week in subdued light at room temperature. Seal the seeds inside a small, airtight plastic bag and store them in a refrigerator at about 35oF (do not freeze them). Seeds extracted and stored this way remain viable for at least 7 years.

(See Growing Western Huckleberries by Dan Barney for more instructions).

**The second and third years.** Seedlings normally remain in pots for 2 to 3 years before transplanting to fields or garden beds. During their second and later years, grow containerized plants outdoors or in a greenhouse in partial shade to full sun and fertilize them as in table 1.

***Growing huckleberries in the field or garden bed***

**Preparing the soil**

Adding rotted sawdust or bark to the soil a year before planting will improve huckleberry performance. Spread a layer of sawdust or bark about 6 inches deep in the row or planting bed and till it into the soil with a rototiller or shovel. Include 1 pound of 10-10-10 fertilizer for every cubic foot (13 pounds) of sawdust or bark. One authority recommends partially burying 12-inch-diameter or larger, rotted conifer logs (except cedar) in the rows alongside where the huckleberries will be planted. The rotting wood enhances huckleberry growth. Also, the huckleberry rhizomes tend to grow along and within the logs, creating narrower, more easily managed rows.

**Planting**

When the plants you’ve grown from seeds or cuttings are about 6 inches tall, transplant them into the field or garden bed. You may also choose to grow the huckleberries for an additional year in 1-gallon containers if you want larger plants for setting into the field. Containerized plants grown or overwintered outdoors can be transplanted any time from early spring through late fall, although spring or fall planting is generally recommended. If the soils on your site frost heave, plant in the spring. Greenhouse-grown plants or those coming out of refrigerated storage should be planted after the danger of a killing frost (28oF) is past. Plants that have been growing in partial shade will sunscald and suffer stress if transplanted directly to a full-sun location. To reduce sunscald, gradually decrease the shading of your containerized plants beginning 2 weeks before transplanting.

Plant your huckleberries just deep enough to cover the potting soil with garden or field soil. Set the plants 3 feet apart in rows 8 to 10 feet apart, depending on the mower, 16 tiller, and other equipment you will use. Immediately after planting, water to settle the soil. Mulch around each bush with about 4 inches of sawdust or fine bark. Huckleberries are prime deer, moose, and elk feed. In some western areas, you may need to protect your plants from browse damage. If you believe browsing may be a problem, install a fence before planting.

**Ensuring cross pollination**

Huckleberries may produce more and larger berries when they are cross pollinated. Plant several individuals of the same species together to ensure cross pollination and good fruit set. This will not be a problem if you start your plants from seed. If you propagate your huckleberries from rhizome or stem cuttings that are all collected from the same plant, however, all of the mature plants will be identical and no cross pollination will occur. To avoid this situation, collect cuttings from several different colonies separated by at least several hundred yards. When planting into the garden or field, ensure that some plants originate from different colonies.