

Haskap in the Garden



Haskap berries are a relatively new crop in the United States and subsequently, the home garden. Haskaps, *Lonicera caerulea* L., are a long-lived, extremely hardy shrub. Fruits are an excellent source of vitamin C, with higher content than many other berries including blueberry, raspberry and strawberry.

Haskaps, also known as Blue Honeysuckle and Honeyberry, are native to northern Eurasia and Canada. The name “haskap” is used to indicate varieties that are a type of Japanese Blue Honeysuckle (subspecies *emphylocalyx*), and the term “honeyberry” is the commercial name used for Russian and Kuril varieties of Blue Honeysuckle (subspecies *kamtschatica* and *edulis*). Japanese and Russian varieties respond differently to the Intermountain West’s climate. These plants are native to very cold regions and experience scorching, mildew and pre-mature leaf drop when grown in warmer climates (above zone 6). Plants of Russian origin are more susceptible to summer injury in warm regions. In areas with intense summer heat, the Japanese varieties are better suited for planting. However, in colder, higher-elevation areas, the Russian types may be better adapted.

To avoid redundancy, the name “haskap” will be used here and is meant to include both the Japanese and Russian subspecies.

Haskap Plants

Haskaps are in the honeysuckle family and are a deciduous, cold hardy shrub that can live up to 30 years. They can grow to be 6 feet high and wide and the form varies significantly, from low-growing to upright, depending on the variety. Bushes do not sucker. Leaf shape varies dramatically among varieties and range from 1 to 4 inches long. Small, cream to yellow colored blossoms erupt in early spring and can withstand hard spring frosts down to 19 #F. The bush produces irregular shaped, dark blue

fruits that vary from round to oblong (with many shapes in between) and range in size from ½ inch long to 2 inches or more, depending on cultivar. Berries ripen in early to mid-June, usually just before strawberries begin producing. Fruit can be tart to sweet with a flavor unique to itself but that some describe as a cross between raspberry, currant and blueberry.

Haskaps require cross-pollination with an unrelated cultivar that blooms at the same time. Due to the novelty of the plant, finding haskap at a local nursery may be difficult. Most purchases of these plants will need to be made through a catalog. Visit Cornell University’s nursery list for a list of nurseries selling haskap plants. It is important to note that the most common cultivars available in plant nurseries are those that fall in the Russian subspecies and are commonly marketed as Honeyberries. Care should be taken when choosing plants to ensure that the cultivars are compatible for cross pollination. Choose reputable companies and be sure to inspect plants on arrival for damage, pests and healthy plant tissue.

Recommended Haskap Varieties

‘Tundra’

(4 to 5 feet tall) has firm skinned fruit that are fairly large. The plant is resistant to powdery mildew and is often used in commercial production because the berries have a dry picking scar and are quite firm.

‘Borealis’

(4 feet tall) is touted to be one of the best tasting cultivars. It produces large fruit and is well-suited for the home garden.

‘Indigo Gem’

(5 to 6 feet tall) produces fruit that is smaller and tangier than most other cultivars, and is a very heavy producer. Unfortunately, it is somewhat susceptible to powdery mildew.

‘Blue Lightning’

(5 feet tall) is a popular Russian cultivar and produces a heavy crop of sweet-tart dark blue berries.

‘Kamchatka’

(5-6 feet tall) is another Russian cultivar and produces large, abundant dark blue fruit.

How to Grow Haskap

Soil

Haskaps prefer sunny locations with well-drained soils but do well in a variety of situations. Their native range includes calcareous soils with pH levels as high as 7.7, and may tolerate even higher pH levels. The plants grow naturally in river beds and marsh areas, giving them potential as a fruit crop that grows well in wet soils. Haskap has proven to be adaptable in a wide array of locations, light situations and soil types and will likely do well in many Utah gardens.

Soil Preparation

Soil preparation should be done before the arrival of the plants. It is recommended to have soil tested in order to add preplant fertilizer according to soil test recommendations. Additionally, organic matter is highly beneficial to all soil types in Utah and will increase nutrient availability and waterholding capacity in the soil. As with all garden plants, weed management should be a priority as weeds will compete for nutrients and water and can harbor unwanted pests and pathogens. Removing all existing weeds and controlling perennial weeds in the area before planting will provide long-term benefits in weed control.

Planting and Spacing

Fall is the best time to plant Haskap; however, spring plantings of dormant plants can be successful. Fall planting allows more time for root development helping plants survive summer heat. For most cultivars, leaving 3 to 4 feet between plants within the row and 6 to 10 feet between rows is sufficient. Some commercial growers plant bushes close enough in the row that they become a hedge, similar to a row of raspberries. Immediately after planting, thoroughly wet and disturb the soil to remove any air pockets that may remain around the roots.

Fertilization

Nitrogen fertilizers are recommended for spring application but discouraged after that time, as rapid growth late in the growing season can make the plant more susceptible to winter injury. One half cup per plant of a general, balanced fertilizer such as a 16-16-16 applied in the spring should be enough to meet the nutrient needs of the plant throughout the growing season.

Irrigation

Ensure that soils remain moist, but not overly wet, particularly during establishment. Haskap naturally grows near water and is not drought-tolerant. Drip irrigation is a particularly effective method as it keeps moisture off of the leaves and can be slowly applied, reducing runoff. Depending on the soil type, deep water the plant every 5 to 7 days. Frequent, shallow watering events discourage deep root development.

Pruning

Haskap plants need annual pruning to maintain vigor and encourage new, productive growth. The best time to prune is in late winter, while the bushes are still dormant. Pruning is minimal for the first three to four years: simply remove any dead, diseased or touching branches. Once the plant is well established and the canopy has filled in, pruning should also include thinning out the oldest branches to keep the canopy open and encourage new growth. Do not prune out more than 25% of the plant in any given year.

Problems with Growing Haskap

Haskaps have very few pests that affect fruit production. Sunscald on the fruit is an issue for high elevation plantings. Planting in an area protected from drying summer winds and late afternoon sun is recommended to help mitigate this issue. Deer seem to leave the plants alone, but birds can be a significant problem. Placing netting over plants in late May or early June will help reduce crop loss to birds.

Although it seldom affects the berries, in late summer the fungus powdery mildew (*Sphaerotheca* spp.) can develop. Watch for white powdery patches on the leaves in mid-summer. These patches will eventually turn brown. The best control option for powdery mildew is to plant resistant cultivars. Pruning to increase air circulation will also help keep disease occurrence low.

How to Harvest, Store, and Use Haskap

Plants will likely produce only a handful of berries the first few years, but production will begin to increase by year 3 or 4. Yield potential depends on the cultivar, but can range from 5 to 15 pounds per plant each year once the plant is mature. Fruit will begin to change color in late May and early June and are usually ready for harvest a few weeks later. Fruit from some cultivars can 'bleed' from a picking

scar and these cultivars have a shorter storage life than those that do not. Harvest is typically done by hand-picking each berry but with some cultivars, the fruit can be shaken off onto a tarp placed beneath the branches.

Haskap are great for fresh eating but do well in a plethora of processed foods. When frozen, the entire berry is reported to melt away in the mouth. Seeds are very small and similar to those of a kiwi. Haskap are commonly used in pies, jams, jellies, juices, and ice creams. They can be frozen, dried and bottled and are commonly used for winemaking.

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