

Blueberry

Grow

Blueberries are a fruit that grows on a bush. Blueberries have been around for about 13,000 years. Blueberry bushes are native to the United States and still grow wild in many places. U.S. cultivated blueberries were first grown in New Jersey at the turn of the 20th century. Since then, many varieties of blueberries have been cultivated across North and South America and beyond.¹

The U.S. is the world's largest blueberry producer. Over 80 percent of the harvest is cultivated blueberries. Ten states grow 98 percent of the U.S. commercial blueberry crop. North Carolina is among those. In total, 38 states grow blueberries.¹

Young plants can be purchased at a garden center. Plant bare root plants in late winter (February or March) and potted plants in November or December. To support cross-pollination, plant two different varieties of blueberries for the fruit to develop. Blueberries prefer full sun. Place plants 1 foot deep and 4-5 feet apart. Bushes can grow up to 12 feet tall but usually peak at 6 feet. The first year's harvest will be small, but after 2-3 years it should increase in size. To protect the harvest from birds, cover bushes with netting supported on a framework.^{1,2}

Fun Fact: Although they have the name "blue" berry, they can also be grown with pink or purple skin.²

Choose

Blueberries are in season May through November from sources across the United States. Peak season in N.C. is May to August, depending on the variety.^{1,3}

Quality berries should be firm, plump and dry. They should have a deep blue or blue-black color with a silvery sheen, called a bloom. If a blueberry shows any sign of red, it has not fully ripened and will likely be tart. White or green blueberries are not ripe and should be left on the bush to ripen. Blueberries do not ripen after harvest.^{1,4}

Fun Fact: July is National Blueberry Month.¹



Store

Sort through the blueberries to remove any with mold. Store blueberries in the refrigerator, 32-36°F, in a single layer, if possible. Blueberries are very sensitive to rough handling or temperature fluctuations. Heat exposure will shorten how long the berries can be stored before using or freezing. Do not expose blueberries in closed bags or containers to sun or heat. If ideal conditions exist, fresh blueberries can keep 10-14 days. For the best taste and texture, try to eat within 1 week. Frozen blueberries can be stored up to 6 months.^{1,4}

Fun Fact: Blueberries are the second most popular "berry" grown in America after strawberries.

Use

Do not wash blueberries until ready to cook or eat them. Washing too early can result in mushy berries. Fresh or frozen blueberries should be washed under clean, running water and drained prior to eating.^{1,5}

Blueberries are sold fresh and also frozen, canned, dried, pureed, and concentrated. Fresh berries are great alone as a snack. Add to yogurt, cereal, waffles, pancakes, baked goods, salads and salsa. Blend into smoothies.¹

Fun Fact: Blueberries are the official state Blue Berry for North Carolina.⁶

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Teach

Roots in the Soil and Our History

Native Americans first enjoyed blueberries year round. When blueberries were in season, they ate them fresh. They dried them in the sun to have later during the winter months. They added them whole to soups and stews and crushed them into a powder to use as a preservative on meat. Native Americans shared dried blueberries with the pilgrims to help them through the first winter. Today, most Americans have cranberry sauce for Thanksgiving. For the first Thanksgiving, many historians believe fresh cranberries and blueberries were on the menu.⁷

Wild lowbush blueberries are grown in Maine and parts of Canada. They are spread by underground runners, called rhizomes, which produce new shoots and stems. Wild berries are harvested using handheld rakes.⁸ Cultivated blueberries, Northern and Southern Highbush and Rabbiteye, are planted. Highbush blueberries can be harvested by hand or machine.^{1,3}

Fun Fact: Native Americans first called blueberries “star berries” because the blossom end of each berry, called the calyx, forms a perfect five-pointed star.^{1,2}

Class Activity - Blueberry Varieties

Materials Needed:

- Wild lowbush blueberries (If not available fresh, try frozen. The label must say “wild” blueberries.)
- Cultivated highbush or rabbiteye blueberries

Steps: *Use food safety steps. Wash hands and produce.

1. Have students examine the blueberries. Explain to students that a blueberry is a “true blue” food. The blue color is from a plant pigment called anthocyanin that imparts colors from blue to shades of red.¹
2. Compare and contrast the blueberries. Wild lowbush blueberries are smaller in size and have a bluish pulp. Cultivated highbush blueberries are usually larger in size and have a light green pulp.^{1,8}
3. Have students research the history, nutrition, benefits and uses of blueberries and present their findings.

Eat

Good Things Can Come in Small Packages!

One cup of blueberries has around 80 calories. These berries are cholesterol free and low in sodium and fat. Blueberries are an excellent source of vitamins C and K. One serving provides almost 25% of the Daily Value for vitamin C. Vitamin C helps form collagen to hold muscles, bones and tissues together, protects us from infections and bruising, aids in healing, keeps our gums healthy, helps our body absorb iron and folate from plants, and acts as an antioxidant to prevent cell damage. Vitamin K helps our body clot blood and make proteins needed for our blood, bones and kidneys. Blueberries are rich in manganese, which plays an important role in forming bone and converting carbohydrate, protein, and fat into energy. Blueberries are full of fiber. Insoluble fiber aids digestion. Soluble fiber helps lower blood cholesterol. Phytonutrients, called anthocyanidins, in blueberries act as antioxidants and anti-inflammatory agents preventing or repairing cell damage. They may help with maintaining brain function and healthy immune function.^{1,3,5,10}

Fun Fact: Blueberries have four cousins - cranberries, huckleberries, lingonberries, and bilberries. All are native North American fruits.^{2,11}

Find

For more blueberry info and resources, visit:

1. U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council, www.blueberrycouncil.org
2. North Carolina State Extension, www.ces.ncsu.edu
3. North Carolina Blueberries, <http://northcarolinablueberries.com>
4. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, www.fns.usda.gov
5. Produce for Better Health Foundation, <https://fruitsandveggies.org>
6. North Carolina Secretary of State, https://www.sosnc.gov/divisions/publications/kids_page_symbols
7. History, www.history.com
8. Wild Blueberries of North America, www.wildblueberries.com
9. Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Association, www.cranberries.org
10. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, www.eatright.org
11. University of Idaho, www.cals.uidaho.edu