

Native Fruits & Berries

We all are familiar with the saying, “As American as Apple Pie.” However, apples aren’t American plants. A more appropriate saying would be, “As American as Blueberry Pie,” since a number of species of blueberries call North America home. The following is a quick rundown of a variety of North American fruits and berries for the home garden. Some will be familiar to you, others not. For more info, ask us or check out the books listed at the bottom of this handout.

Blueberries

There are two common species of blueberries that grow in our area, the Highbush Blueberry, *Vaccinium corymbosum*, and the Lowbush Blueberry, *Vaccinium angustifolium*. Many consider the latter species the tastier of the two and it’s more likely to be nibbled on by hikers because it’s more common at higher elevations. However, for productivity it’s hard to beat Highbush Blueberries and most home gardeners will want to grow one or more of the many available cultivars. Indeed it’s best to grow at least two varieties: even though blueberries are self-fertile, you’ll get better fruit set and larger berries if you have two varieties that can cross-pollinate. Varieties don’t differ that much in flavor, but do ripen at different times so that with judicious choice of cultivars you can have fresh blueberries available from July through September. If you live at higher elevations and have had trouble with winter dieback of highbush blueberries, there are hybrids of highbush and lowbush blueberries that combine the greater hardiness of the lowbush with the greater productivity and size of the highbush. Blueberries also make great ornamental plants and are a perfect choice for edible landscaping. Require highly acidic soil.

Lingonberry

Another species of *Vaccinium*, in this case *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* var. *minus*. Lingonberry is the European name for this plant, which in North America is more often called Mountain Cranberry or Cowberry. The North American variety is a lower grower and only flowers and sets fruit once a year, whereas the European variety does so twice a year. Great for sauces, tarts and preserves. Requires acidic soil.

Cranberry

Yet another species of *Vaccinium*, this one *Vaccinium macrocarpon*. You don’t need a bog to grow cranberries but they do like moist soil with plenty of organic matter. They also need some room to grow but selections with more restrained growth are available.

Huckleberry

These are related to blueberries but are member of the genus *Gaylussacia*. Our most common species is the black huckleberry, *Gaylussacia baccata*. The fruits are as tasty as blueberries but contain considerably larger seeds. Thus they are often called “Crackleberries”.

Elderberry or American Elder

A very common shrub in low-lying areas and wet sites, the berries of elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) can be made into a wonderful preserve. The flowers are also edible in the form of fritters.

Raspberry

Commonly available varieties of raspberries have a complex heritage but generally include some North American parentage. Our two common species are the American Red Raspberry, *Rubus idaeus*, and the Black Raspberry or Blackcap, *Rubus occidentalis*. These are as tasty as horticultural cultivars but generally not as large. Raspberries have to be pruned to maximize yields and perhaps trellised. Fall-bearing cultivars are available and, in combination with the summer-bearing varieties provide a long fruiting season.

Blackberry

Rubus allegheniensis, our native blackberry, is a vigorous plant with heavy thorns and tasty fruit. Horticulturists have created varieties that are thornless and more upright. This allows some varieties to be grown without a trellis although most growers still use trellises. As for raspberries, pruning is essential to maximize yield and keep the planting manageable. There are two new varieties of blackberry, Prime Jim and Prime Jan that can be treated like fall-bearing raspberries. They will produce fruits on a primocane (1-yr cane) rather than a floricanes (2-yr cane). This is an advantage for growers in colder sites where overwintering survival of primocanes is problematic.

Strawberries

Many of you may be familiar with the wonderful taste packed inside the tiny berries of our Wild Strawberry, *Fragaria virginiana*. All of our common strawberry varieties are hybrids derived from this species and a western North American strawberry, *Fragaria chiloensis*. There are three types of strawberries: June Berries, the long-time standard,

Everbearers, which produce two crops of berries, in the spring and the fall, and Day-Neutrals, which fruit all season long.

Gooseberry

The American gooseberry, *Ribes hirtellum* is much more resistant to powdery mildew than the European gooseberry, *Ribes grossularia*, but generally isn't as tasty. There are a few cultivars of American gooseberry, though, which are sweet and suitable for fresh eating - the best is probably Poorman. To help avoid powdery mildew problems with European gooseberries grow them on a trellis and prune to improve air flow.

Grapes

There are a few species of grapes native to our area. The fox grape, *Vitis labrusca*, is the species from which most cultivars have been derived. The frost grape, *Vitis riparia*, is also used to improve cold hardiness. Seedless grapes are superior for fresh eating but some varieties are marginally cold-hardy in our area. We have a major problem controlling the fungal disease black rot using organic techniques and are just about ready to give up on our grapes in order to try hardy kiwifruits.

Juneberry or Serviceberry

A number of species of *Amelanchier* grow wild in our area including Downy Serviceberry, *Amelanchier arborea*, Juneberry, *A. canadensis*, and Smooth Serviceberry, *A. laevis*. The fruits of these species are the size and color of blueberries, but their flavor differs. They have more of an almond-like aftertaste. Like blueberries, birds love them so you'll have to be quick, protect the berries or let the birds have a share.

Saskatoon

This is another species of *Amelanchier* but it hails from the northern plains where it's grown commercially for its fruit. I prefer the fruit of this species to our local ones. It grows to be an 8-10 foot shrub and a number of improved cultivars are available. The one we have had most success with is a compact grower (3-4') called 'Regent'

Pawpaw

Not native to the Catskills, Pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) is fairly common in the midwest. The fruit is shaped similar to a banana and the fruit is reported to have a banana-like flavor but with additional flavors of vanilla custard, pineapple, and mango. Unfortunately, this small tree has a well-deserved reputation of being hard to establish. Since it's an understory tree it needs some shade when young. Although reported to be completely deer-resistant, I've had two trees sheared off by a rabbit and I don't believe that deer won't eat it.

Persimmon

The persimmon available in stores is the Asian persimmon. It's generally not hardy in our area but our North American species (*Diospyros virginiana*) is perfectly hardy in the Catskills. American persimmon produces smaller fruit than the Asian species but with a more intense flavor. Most cultivars are females and need a male pollinator, but the cultivar 'Meader' is self-fertile and produces fruits with no seeds. A favorite of raccoons and opossums, you have to beat them to the fruit or screen them out. Adaptable to a wide variety of cultural conditions. Grows to be a large tree so you may want to prune it.

Mulberry

The red mulberry, *Morus rubra*, is the most widely distributed mulberry in North America. It produces tasty fruits and has been crossed with the Asian white mulberry, *Morus alba*, to produce a number of fine cultivars, the best of which is probably 'Illinois Everbearing.'

Plums

There are a handful of native plum species that produce tasty fruit. The most common is the wild plum, *Prunus americana*. This is a cold-hardy species that has often been crossed with European and Japanese plums. Plums are hard to grow organically because of such pests as the Plum Curculio. A new product, Surround, which is composed of fine clay particles holds great promise for combating this pest. Available from Gardens Alive.

Viburnum

There are a number of species of Viburnum that grow in our area. Three produce fruits that are edible although not commonly eaten. And none of the species has been the subject of horticultural attempts at improvement. Highbush Cranberry, *Viburnum trilobum*, produces bright red, tart fruits that cannot be eaten off the bush but can be made into preserves. Nannyberry, *Viburnum lentago*, is a common species in thickets and produces a good fruit for nibbling although I'm not in love with the flavor and the seed is quite large. Blackhaw, *Viburnum prunifolium*, produces blue-black fruits that reportedly make a good preserve - we have three planted in our orchard but they have been slow-growing and have not yet flowered or produced fruit.

Books on Fruits and Berries

- Bennett, Jennifer, ed. 1996. *Berries. A Firefly Gardener's Guide*. Firefly Books, Buffalo, NY.
- Bowling, Barbara. 2000. *The Berry Growers Companion*. Timber Press, Portland, OR.
A little info on edible landscaping.
- Brill, Steve. 1994. *Identifying and Harvesting Edible and Medicinal Plants in Wild (And Not So Wild) Places*.
- Creasy, Rosalind. 1993. *Organic Gardener's Edible Plants*. Van Patten Publishing, Portland, OR.
- Denckla, Tanya. 1994. *Organic Gardener's Home Reference*. Storey Communications, Pownal, VT.
- Facciola, Stephen. 1998. *Cornucopia II. A Source Book of Edible Plants*. Kampong Publications, Vista, CA.
Lists varieties of fruits and where to get them.
- Gough, Bob. 1997. *The Smart Gardener's Guide to Growing Fruits*. Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA.
- Hagy, Fred. 2001. *Landscaping with Fruits and Vegetables*. Overlook Press, Woodstock, NY.
- Hall-Beyer, Bart & Richard, Jean. 1989. *Ecological Fruit Production in the North*.
Published by the authors, I believe this one is out of print. Focuses primarily on traditional fruits such as apples, pears and cherries, but also considers berries and edible wild plants.
- Hill, Lewis. 1992. *Fruits and Berries for the Home Garden*. Storey Communications, Pownal, VT.
- Holmes, Roger, ed. 1996. *Taylor's Guide to Fruits and Berries*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA.
One of the best.
- Kourik, Robert. 1986. *Designing and Maintaining your Edible Landscape Naturally*. Metamorphic Press, Santa Rosa, CA.
- Nick, Jean & Bradley, Fern. 1994. *Growing Fruits and Vegetables Organically*. Rodale Press. Emmaus, PA.
- Page, Steve & Smillie, Joe. 1995. *The Orchard Almanac. A Seasonal Guide to Healthy Fruit Trees*. agAccess, Davis, CA.
An excellent resource for the home fruit orchard, stressing Integrated Pest Management.
- Reich, Lee. 2004. *Uncommon Fruits for Every Garden*. Timber Press, OR.
An excellent treatment of a wide variety of unconventional fruits including the North American Pawpaw, Gooseberry, Juneberry, Persimmon, Mulberry, and Lowbush Blueberry.
- Reich, Lee. 1997. *The Pruning Book*. Taunton Press, Newton, CT.
- Trehane, Jennifer. 2004. *Blueberries, Cranberries and other Vacciniums*. Timber Press, Portland, OR.
- Whealy, Kent & Dumuth, Steve, eds. 1993. *Fruit, Berry and Nut Inventory*. 2nd ed. Seed Saver Publications, Decorah, IA
Lists varieties of fruits and where to get them.