

Native American Berries

If you enjoy foraging for America's wild berries, here are some that can be easily integrated into your home landscape.

BY JESSIE KEITH



EDIBLE BERRIES native to North America feed wildlife and offer untamed, flavorful pickings for hikers and roadside harvesters. Native blueberries, gooseberries, raspberries, and others pack a punch of flavor unmatched by garden-variety hybrids—anyone who has tasted a wild blueberry pie knows store-bought berries are no match! Many native berry plants are also attractive additions to the cultivated landscape. Plant sizes, cultural requirements, and growth habits vary widely, so there's a native berry for practically every garden situation.

Many native berry plants thrive in part shade. Here, red elderberry (center with white flowers) and thimbleberry, in front of it, grow companionably at the edge of a woodland in this Bellingham, Washington, garden.

MARK TURNER

WHAT'S A BERRY?

The word “berry” brings to mind things round, colorful, juicy, and delicious. So what is a berry? Botanically, a berry is defined as a fleshy fruit with a soft, edible exterior, produced from a single flower and containing one ovary, or gynoecium. But many of the fruits that we commonly think of as berries don't fit this formal definition.

For example, favorite “berries,” such as raspberries and blackberries, are aggregate fruits in the genus *Rubus*. These fruits, composed of clusters of individual seeds each surrounded by soft flesh, are known as drupelets. Strawberries (*Fragaria* spp.)

are aggregate-accessory fruits where each “seed” is a fruit called an achene that is embedded in an enlarged, fleshy receptacle (flower base). Common true berries include currants, gooseberries, cranberries, elderberries, and blueberries. For the purpose of this article, I'm going to refer to them all as berries from this point on.

AN IRRESISTIBLE ATTRACTION

One thing berries have in common is that they coevolved with animals for seed dispersal. Their fleshy, sweet, colorful fruits are attractive and encourage consumption, which results in wider seed dispersal

and increases a berried plant's chance of geographic spread and survival. Often, partial digestion thins seed coats and helps the seeds of these plants germinate—making consumers both seed prep and dispersal tools. Without animals to spread their seeds, berried plants would not have the great evolutionary success they've had.

The history of humans' relationship with North American berries began with native people and their close connection to the land's wealth of wild food. It is estimated that Native Americans used some 250 different species of berries and fruits. Many tribes also cultivated berries; strawberries, blueberries, and cranberries were the most commonly grown. These and other berries were used for both medicine and food.

Gardeners interested in native berries have lots of options. Wild blueberries and wild strawberries are adaptable to both wooded and sunny landscapes, as well as containers. Large shrubby elderberries make excellent fruitful screens and any berried bramble (*Rubus* spp.) can be trained and tended in an edible garden. Native gooseberries and currants can grow in practically any sunny or partially sunny garden spot. Whenever possible, seek out regionally native species to maximize success and wildlife value.

BLUEBERRIES AND RELATIVES

With their graceful, drooping spring flowers and red to purple fall foliage, blueberries (*Vaccinium* spp.) are one of the rock stars of the edible landscaping world. Relatives like cranberries, lingonberries, and huckleberries (*Gaylussacia* spp.), which also offer exceptional wildlife value via both flowers and fruits, are gaining popularity.

Members of the heath family (Ericaceae)—along with landscape standards such as azaleas and mountain laurels—the many acid-soil loving shrubs in the genus *Vaccinium* bear all manner of flavorful and nutritious fruits. They are moderately self-fruitful, but produce more bountiful harvests if grown in small groups.

Of the blueberries, highbush (*V. corymbosum*, USDA Hardiness Zones 3–7, AHS Heat Zones 7–1) and lowbush (*V. angustifolium*, Zones 2–8, 8–1) are both primarily northeastern species found in forested areas. Aside from height differences, highbush tends to have larger



Blueberry bushes are easy to grow and offer three seasons of landscape appeal.

fruits. New varieties are bred each year for better fruiting and disease resistance, each classified by fruiting season: early, mid-, or late. Of these, the high-yielding, easy-to-grow *V. corymbosum* 'Draper' is a popular mid-season variety with dark, plump berries. The late-producing 'Aurora' is another winner with large, extra flavorful berries. Among lowbush selections, the bushy *V. angustifolium* 'Burgundy' has colorful, deep red new growth and fall color in addition to producing many small, sweet fruits mid-season. A collection of compact selections, marketed under the trade name BrazelBerries, is well suited to container culture.

Western gardeners should consider the Cascade blueberry (*V. deliciosum*, Zones 4–8, 8–4), also called the blueleaf huckleberry. An inhabitant of higher-elevation meadows and open pine forests, this spreading shrub forms matted colonies that become covered with dark blue berries in summer months. For flavor, these are the berries of choice. Research conducted at the University of Idaho and Washington State University identified 31 aromatic flavor compounds in the berries that give them a more intense, pleasing flavor profile than domesticated blueberries.

Cranberries (*V. macrocarpon*, Zones 2–7, 7–1) are found in peaty bogs of the North. They are pretty plants for the garden but do best when grown in boggy trough gardens enriched with peat. Cold winters are required for good health. The red fruits are produced in fall, at the same time the small leaves turn shades of bright gold and red.

Lingonberries (*V. vitis-idaea*, Zones 2–6, 6–1) are native to the arctic and alpine regions of the Northern Hemisphere; the subspecies *minus* is the North American variant. This attractive, creeping evergreen shrub grows no more than eight inches tall and spreads by underground runners, making it useful as a groundcover among other plants that thrive in acidic soil. The tart, pea-sized, red berries ripen in late summer or fall; they make delicious jams and syrups. A sunny, well-drained location with some protection from winter winds is best, and mulching helps reduce weeds and keep the soil evenly moist.

BRAMBLES

North America is home to more than 60 berry-producing brambly shrubs in the

Resources

Food Plants of the North American Indians by Elias Yanovsky (originally published 1936). Redwood City Seed Company, Redwood City, CA, 1980.

Landscaping with Fruit by Lee Reich, Storey Publishing, North Adams, MA, 2009.

Northern Bushcraft: <http://northernbushcraft.com/berries>.

North American Cornucopia: Top 100 Indigenous Food Plants by Ernest Small. CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL, 2013.

North American Fruit Explorers, www.nafex.org.

Sources

Edible Landscaping, Afton, VA. (434) 361-9134. <http://ediblelandscaping.com>.

Oikos Tree Crops, Kalamazoo, MI. (269) 624-6233. www.oikostreecrops.com.

One Green World, Mulino, OR. (877) 353-4028. www.onegreenworld.com.

Raintree Nursery, Morton, WA. (800) 391-8892. www.raintreenursery.com.

St. Lawrence Nurseries, Potsdam, NY. (315) 265-6739. www.sln.potsdam.ny.us.



Compact blueberries such as Peach Sorbet BrazelBerry are easy to grow in containers.

genus *Rubus*. Many garden-quality species offer excellent fruit, but all require regular maintenance because brambles sucker and spread. As a whole, bees value the flowers and many animals feed on the berries. Some species also have beautiful fall color and spring flowers. Fruiting types are distinguished by berry production times—either in summer (floricane) or fall (primocane).

Cloudberry and baked appleberry are two of the common names for the uncommon *R. chamaemorus* (Zones 2–6,

6–1). Native across the northernmost parts of the Northern Hemisphere, the low, spreading plants have thick, rose-like leaves. The berries ripen from red to gold in fall. Each small, bulbous fruit has large seeds and a unique flavor similar to that of tart apples. In the wild, the plants grow in moist, sphagnum-rich soils, so they are best grown in gardens with very peaty, well-drained, acidic soil in part to full sun. Specimens can also be grown in protected rock gardens where summers are cool and winters cold.

The American red raspberry (*R. idaeus*, Zones 4–11, 10–1) has hundreds of cultivated varieties to its name. Like many of the berries mentioned, the species is native across the entire Northern Hemisphere, where it grows in meadows and along woodland edges; it tolerates both moist and dry soil conditions.

The best for the home gardener are long-producing varieties with high fruit quality. Of these, ‘Heritage’, bred at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, is a popular and reliable selection. This fall-bearing variety yields loads of firm, flavorful, medium-sized, red berries on disease-resistant plants. ‘Prelude’, also from Cornell, is currently the earliest of the red raspberries, offering medium-sized red fruits on plants that occasionally produce a second crop in fall. There are also golden “red raspberries” such as ‘Anne’ developed at the University of Maryland in College Park, which bears large, yellow, conical fruits mid- to late season. ‘Nordic’, which produces prolific red berries in early summer, is hardy but coarse in appearance.

Native to the western United States and Canada, thimbleberries (*R. parviflorus*, Zones 3–9, 9–1) are beautiful, clump-forming shrubs with large, bright green, maplelike leaves and showy white flowers that bloom from late spring to early summer on second- and third-year shoots. Broad, flattened, scarlet-red berries that are tart and seedy are produced by late summer. The graceful, mounded, thornless shrubs perform best in well-drained soil and part sun. Wildlife is drawn to the flowers and fruit, and the foliage is a larval food source for the yellow-banded day sphinx moth (*Proserpinus flavofasciata*).

Another beautiful, garden-worthy bramble is the salmonberry (*R. spectabilis*, Zones 5–8, 8–5). Its pink, cupped, downturned flowers attract hummingbirds as well as bees and butterflies, and its fruits feed many animals. The large berries are very soft, somewhat dry and flavor varies from plant to plant, though they are generally valued for jam making. The shade-loving shrubs sucker freely and are best planted in naturalistic landscapes, especially where erosion control is needed.

Naturally inhabiting forests and fields from California into western Canada, the Pacific or California blackberry (*R. ursinus*, Zones 5–10, 10–1) has delicious black fruits



Hardy ‘Nordic’ is one of hundreds of delicious selections of the American red raspberry.

that are very sweet and juicy when ripe. This makes them popular among wild fruit gatherers as well as wild animals. Another common name is the trailing blackberry, because their spiny arching stems tend to root when they come in contact with soil. The mound-

ing shrubs produce clusters of white spring flowers that have elongated petals and attract many insect pollinators. One nice landscape feature is that these adaptable shrubs grow well in moist soils, making them a good fit for low spots in the garden.



Suited to shady, naturalistic landscapes, salmonberry has deep pink flowers and orange fruits.



American black elderberries develop into large shrubs that offer beautiful white summer flower clusters followed by attractive black berries that can be used to make jam, preserves, or juice.

ELDERBERRIES

Native elderberries (*Sambucus* spp.) are large, bushy, tough, deciduous shrubs with high wildlife habitat value, making them all-around good berry plants for any garden.

Both the broad flattened clusters of fragrant, ivory-colored flowers and the dark, tart berries that follow are useful in the kitchen. The flowers flavor elderflower fritters and beverages, while the berries can be made into jam, jelly, and syrup (but are generally not eaten raw).

The American black elderberry (*S. nigra* ssp. *canadensis*, syn. *S. canadensis*, Zones 2–9, 9–1), grows along roadsides and meadows in much of North America. It has white flower clusters and black berries.

The red-fruited elderberry (*S. racemosa*, Zones 3–7, 7–1) is also native across much of temperate North America. Al-

though its fruits are not as tasty as those of its relative, it has several pretty selections including the compact, cut-leaf selection ‘*Tenuifolia*’, one of the best for small garden spaces. For added color and elegance, consider a new selection with filigreed chartreuse foliage trademarked as Lemon Lace (‘SMNSRD4’).

Elderberries thrive in full sun but will tolerate some shade. They grow best in slightly acidic to neutral soil, and prefer regular moisture during the growing season. They can get quite large (up to 12 feet tall and wide) over time, but can be pruned radically when needed. Plant two or three to provide optimal cross pollination and fruit set.

GOOSEBERRIES AND CURRANTS

Like cultivated gooseberries, wild forms are prickly and bear tart fruit. The north-

ern Canadian gooseberry (*Ribes oxycanthoides*, Zones 2–6, 6–1) is a small, upright shrub with spiny stems. Small, starry, white flowers are produced in spring followed by round berries that turn from green to burgundy-red in summer. The round seedy berries feed wildlife and make delicious jam.

Adapted to the arid regions of the American Southwest, trumpet gooseberry (*R. leptanthum*, Zones 4–7, 7–1) is an upright shrub with spiny stems and tiny leaves. Its small, purple-black berries are tasty and used to make jelly and wine.

Another desirable *Ribes* is the clove currant (*R. odoratum*, Zones 4–8, 8–5). Although native across much of the West, it has become naturalized in the East. In spring it bears star-shaped, fragrant, yellow flowers that smell of spicy vanilla and are pollinated by bees. By summer, small deep gold or purple berries are produced; these turn black when ripe. A selection called ‘Crandall’ is a good choice for prolific fruiting. A related species, sometimes described as synonymous, is golden currant (*R. aureum*, Zones 5–8, 8–5).

All gooseberries and currants grow well in full to part sun and free-draining, neutral to slightly acidic soil. They are self-fruitful, but as with most fruiting plants, will benefit from cross-pollination. Grow them as an informal hedge or in small clusters.

A word of warning: Some states and counties within states have restrictions on the sale and/or cultivation of *Ribes*, due to concern over the spread of white pine blister rust, a devastating disease of white pine that requires both pine and a susceptible *Ribes* host to complete its life cycle. Check with your local Extension agent about restrictions in your state. (For more about white pine blister rust, see the web special linked to this article on the AHS website at www.ahs.org.)

STRAWBERRIES

Wild strawberries (*Fragaria* spp.) are especially delicious, with a pungent tart sweetness that lingers on the tongue. Like cultivated strawberries, they are adapted to many garden areas where low, spreading plants are needed, and they are perfect for container culture, thriving in moist, loamy soil. Only a few species are native to our continent, but all are edible, varying only in their degree of palatability.



The best-tasting of the wild strawberries, the Virginia strawberry (*F. virginiana*, Zones 5–8, 8–4), is native across North America. It is one parent of the cultivated strawberry (*F. ×ananassa*), which was developed in late 18th-century France as a happenstance cross between *F. virginiana* and the beach strawberry (*F. chiloensis*), though detailed genetic analyses suggest parentage is likely more complex. The surprisingly drought-tolerant Virginia strawberry produces best in full to part sun, bearing many small, sweet fruits from mid- to late spring. Its habitat value is broad: bees feed on the flowers, animals on the fruits, and the foliage is host to the larvae of gray hairstreak (*Stymon melinus*) and grizzled skipper (*Pyrgus centaureae*) butterflies.

The woodland, or alpine, strawberry (*F. vesca*, Zones 5–9, 9–1), is the most geographically widespread species, ranging across the temperate regions of the Northern Hemisphere, and is generally recognized as the first cultivated strawberry. Its flavorful little berries are pro-

Golden currant, above left, has fragrant, exceptionally ornamental yellow blossoms and tasty fruits. Woodland strawberries, below left, are ideal for container culture, so the small but flavorful fruits are near at hand when they ripen in late spring.



duced from late spring to summer on long stems that rise above the plants. The low-growing plants hover inches from the ground and spread by aboveground runners known as stolons.

SAVOR THE FLAVOR

Think regionally when choosing the right berry for your garden, plant them in groups, care for them well, and you will be rewarded with plenty of fruit to harvest. Then again, you can always get to know your local wild berry patches and forage at the right time of year, where allowed. Either way, these berries are to be reveled in, popped into the mouth, or preserved for a later time when fresh summer berries are out of season and most appreciated.

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