

# Blueberries: Superfood is super rewarding

by Carol Barany

**J**uly is National Blueberry Month, and going into the last week of the celebration, I'm still picking way more berries than I can use. While so many crops faltered in Yakima's unusually cool spring, the blueberry harvest at my house was never better. Gardeners may need the cover of night when they re-home their extra zucchini, but who wouldn't want to find a basket of blueberries on their doorstep?

If you're not already growing your own, maybe I can talk you into trying. Blueberries, one of the few fruits native to the United States, have everything going for them.

It all starts in the spring when pearly white, bell-shaped flowers bedeck bare stems. Next comes the best part. Thornless bright blue fruits, bursting with sweetness, low in calories (only 80 in one cup), and packed with powerful antioxidants grow on bushes even a child can harvest without a ladder. Insect pests and diseases are rarely a problem. After the berries are long gone, the plant's foliage and stems take on amazing colors and textures in the fall, making the plants highly ornamental, even the front yard.

For millennia, Native Americans ate wild blueberries fresh and preserved, and used all parts of the plant for an array of medicinal purposes. Some Northeast Native American cultures made the prized berries part of their folklore. If you look at the blossom of a blueberry, the calyx forms a perfect five-point star. Elders would tell how the Great Spirit sent these "star berries" to children in times of famine to relieve their hunger.

Native people passed what they had learned to the first European immigrants. The land and climate in North America were far different from what these early settlers had left behind, and many of their early attempts at farming failed miserably. Hunger and starvation were grim realities. Native Americans shared survival skills, including how to gather blueberries and dry them for winter.



In 1893, after years of harvesting cranberries on her family farm in New Jersey, Elizabeth White wondered why local wild blueberries couldn't be grown as a commercial crop. At the time, farmers believed that wild plants could never be cultivated, and the only way to eat fresh blueberries was to pick them in the wild.

At the same time, USDA botanist Frederick Colville began experimenting with wild blueberries on his own, determined to find a variety that could be farmed. His breakout discovery was that blueberries must be grown in acidic soils.

In 1911, he and Elizabeth became partners and continued their experiments on her farm. Within a year, their collaboration produced a successful field planting, and in 1916 they produced the first commercial crop of high bush blueberries.

By mid-century, more than 200,000 blueberry plants were producing in 13 states. When blueberries were named a "super food" in the 1990s, their popularity soared. With that new designation, those little blue berries were seen as more than just something you made a cobbler from. Americans were adding blueberries to everything. In 2019, 673 million pounds were produced, accounting for 95% of the world's production.

Several states contributed to that figure, but Washington produces the biggest share, totaling over 166 million pounds in 2020. Until recently, most were grown on the westside's acidic soils. Eastern Washington is catching up, with 45% of the state's production.

Years ago, Jim Burley, soil scientist, Master Gardener, and the first commercial blueberry grower in the Valley, taught my husband all he needed to know about growing blueberries. If there ever was a reason to get your soil tested, Jim said this was it, since blueberries demand an acid soil with an ideal pH in the 4.5- 5.5 range. Planting blueberries in typical eastern Washington soils (pH from 6.5-7.5) can trigger an iron deficiency, which yellows the foliage and then eventually kills the plants.

Alkaline soils didn't stop Jim. He knew it was possible to lower pH one point by mixing 2 pounds of sulphur powder per 100 square feet into the top 8 inches of soil. Depending on the pH of your site, soil tests may have to be repeated annually, and sulphur applications may be needed every few years.

All that extra work was worth it, and our plants have never failed to gift us with gallons of berries each summer. But we had to be patient, since it takes a year for soil pH to change. That means no planting until then. Heavily compacted soils, or those low in organic matter, should be improved before planting by adding rotted manure, compost, sawdust, or peat moss. Blueberries are very picky about soil and it's not easy to revive them once they begin to fade.

If you would like to try growing these delectable berries in your own garden, go to <https://pubs.extension.wsu.edu/Product/ProductDetails?productId=3365> for guidance.