

Blueberries and Huckleberries

By Frank A. Lang

Big, fat, store-bought, domesticated blueberries are as close as most Oregonians come to eating Oregon's native huckleberries. The two fruits differ in much the same way as the so-called wild Himalayan blackberry, *Rubus armeniacus*, a naturalized weed, differs from the native wild blackberry, *R. ursinus*, dew berry, or trailing blackberry.

Blueberries and huckleberries are fruits of shrubs in the genus *Vaccinium* in the Heath family Ericaceae. The fruits are true berries, fleshy throughout, and derived from a single, many-seeded ovary. The most commonly cultivated blueberry species in North America is *Vaccinium corymbosum*, the northern high bush blueberry and its cultivars.

Blueberry production is a major industry in Oregon, especially in the Willamette Valley, and more recently on the coast near Bandon. Western Oregon's climate, temperature, and precipitation are good for commercial blueberry production when coupled with slightly acidic soil. The state is fifth in blueberry acreage and third in blueberry production in the United States.

Oregon blueberries are grown for local consumption or export to most states and to several foreign countries. They are eaten fresh, canned, frozen, or made into jam, jelly, or pies and baked goods. Berries collected on public land may require a permit, and collectors must seek permission to collect on private land, especially Native American reservations. In recent years, the season for fresh blueberries has been extended by blueberry production in the Southern Hemisphere, particularly Argentina, Chile, and Australia.

Oregonians have another source of blueberries: native *Vaccinium* species collected in the wild by private individuals or commercial collectors. There are eleven *Vaccinium* species in the state, and they are known by more common names. Generally, while blueberries are domesticated species, huckleberries are wild species. Other common names include bilberry, wortleberry, and cranberry.

Huckleberries vary in growth habits from woody vines to low dwarf and taller shrubs. Some species are deciduous and others are evergreen. They grow in a variety of habitats, from wet coastal bog to understory shrubs in low-elevation coniferous forests, to subalpine forests, open slopes and meadows throughout Oregon.

Two species, the cranberry and dwarf bilberry are introduced species found in wet coastal habitats. All species serve as food for native animals: birds and mammals, especially bears.

Two native species are noteworthy: thin-leaved or blue huckleberry, *Vaccinium membranaceum*, and red huckleberry, *Vaccinium parvifolium*. The former grows in mid to higher elevation coniferous forests. Because of its superior flavor, it is the most extensively harvested wild species. It often forms extensive patches in old burns where there is poor tree regeneration. Native Americans have traditionally eaten the fruit, as do many birds and mammals, and some Native peoples made an infusion of roots and stems for heart problems or as an anti-rheumatic.

Red huckleberry is widely distributed in lower-elevation coniferous forest in soils rich in decaying wood. Native Americans frequently collected its tart red berries, picking them by stripping branches clean of leaves and berries. They then poured the mixture of leaves and berries down wet cedar planks, which the leaves would stick to while the berries bounced or rolled off. They ate fruits fresh or dried and stored them for later use. Some groups used twigs and stems as brooms or made decoctions of bark as a treatment for colds. Modern huckleberry pickers can purchase huckleberry rakes, devices that simplify the process.

Sources

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