

Florida Food Fare

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Blueberry

Description: The conventional notion that blueberries grow only in the north in places like New Jersey, Maine and Michigan is quickly being dispelled. Florida is a major producer of early season blueberries. Commercial blueberry acreage has doubled in the state since the early 1980's. They are now grown from Highlands County north to the Georgia border. This popular little sapphire-colored berry has been around for thousands of years and was once called "star berry" by the native tribes of North America, because of the star-shaped calyx on the top of each berry. When European colonists arrived, they took to the new fruit immediately, creating pies, preserves, cobbler, syrups and other culinary delights. Blueberry is one of the few cultivated fruit crops that is native to North America and 95% of the world's commercial crop comes from the U.S. and Canada. Though there are many varieties of blueberries available to fruit growers, amateurs and professionals alike, only two varieties are suitable for the climate in Florida. The two cultivars that are adapted to the mild Florida winters are: rabbiteye and southern highbush.

Availability: The blueberry season stretches from late March or early April to late September, beginning in the southern states and continuing north as the season continues. Florida berries are usually available through June. Most are hand picked fresh, packed and shipped within 24 hours, but there are many local-sale and U-pick operations. Most U-pick blueberry farms are scattered throughout north, north-central and northwest Florida, primarily near population centers such as Ocala, Gainesville, Tallahassee and Pensacola. Blueberries may be purchased frozen, dried or canned in the supermarket year round.

Nutritional Value: Blueberries contain no cholesterol, fat or sodium and are a good source of Vitamins A, C, fiber, iron and potassium. They are low in calories and contain antioxidants that help in the prevention of various forms of cancer. They also contain a compound called proanthocyanidins which appears to help in the prevention of bacterial infections in the kidney and bladder. One cup of blueberries contains 81 calories, 3.9 g dietary fiber, 129 mg potassium, 18.8 mg vitamin C and 145 IU vitamin A.

Selection and Storage: Look for fresh blueberries that are firm, dry and plump, smooth skinned and relatively free from stems and leaves. Size is not an indicator of maturity, but color is. Berries should be deep purple -blue to blue-black. Reddish berries aren't ripe but may be use in cooking. Stay away from containers with juice stains which may be a sign that the berries are crushed and possibly moldy. Soft watery fruit means the berries are overripe. Dehydrated, wrinkled fruit means the berries have been stored too long. Handle your blueberries with care, touching them as little as possible. Fresh berries should be refrigerated immediately, covered and washed just before using. Use within 10 days of purchase. To freeze blueberries, transfer to an airtight container and do not wash before freezing. Properly stored, frozen blueberries will last a year.

Preparation and Use: Fresh blueberries are a favorite snack eaten out of hand or mixed with fresh fruits and nuts. They are a natural companion for dairy products and who can resist a fresh blueberry muffin, coffee cake or blueberry pancake for breakfast? Mix with cardamon, cinnamon, ginger, mace or nutmeg to make a flavorful sauce or salsa to accompany pork, chicken or game. And don't forget the ever- popular blueberry pie and blueberry cobbler.

Recipes:

Granny's Fresh Blueberry Cream Pie

1 cup light sour cream	1/4 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons flour	1 egg
3/4 cup sugar	2 1/2 cups fresh blueberries
1 teaspoon vanilla	1 unbaked 9" pie shell

Combine first 6 ingredients. Beat until smooth. Fold in blueberries. Pour into pastry shell and bake at 400 degrees for 25 minutes.

Topping:	2 tablespoons flour
2 tablespoons butter	3 tablespoons chopped pecans

Combine topping ingredients; sprinkle on top of pie. Bake 10 more minutes. Chill before serving.

Blueberry Balsamic Vinegar

4 cups frozen, thawed or fresh blueberries Lime peel from 1 lime, cut in strips
1 quart balsamic vinegar (green part only)
1/4 cup sugar 1 (3-inch) cinnamon stick

In a large non-reactive saucepan crush blueberries with a potato masher. Add vinegar, sugar, lime and cinnamon. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer covered for 20 minutes. Cool slightly and pour into large bowl. Cover and refrigerate 2 days to allow flavors to blend. Place a wire mesh strainer over another bowl. In batches, ladle blueberry mixture into strainer pressing out as much liquid as possible. Discard solids. Pour vinegar into clean glass bottles or jars. Cover tightly and refrigerate. Use this to make salad dressing or drizzled over chicken or beef.

Blueberry Walnut Salad

1 (10 oz.) package mixed salad greens 1/4 cup low fat feta cheese, crumbled
1 pint fresh blueberries, washed Low fat raspberry vinaigrette salad
1/4 cup toasted walnuts dressing
1/2 teaspoon salt

In a large bowl, toss salad greens with blueberries and walnuts. Drizzle with vinaigrette and top with feta cheese. Serve immediately. Serves 6.

Blueberry Spiced Jam

2-1/2 pints ripe blueberries 5-1/2 cups sugar
1 tablespoon lemon juice 3/4 cup water
1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg or cinnamon 1 box (1-3/4 oz) powdered pectin

Wash and thoroughly crush berries, one layer at a time in a saucepan. Add lemon juice, spice and water. Stir in pectin and bring to a full rolling boil over high heat, stirring frequently. Add the sugar and return to a rolling boil. Boil hard for 1 minute, stirring constantly. Remove from heat, quickly skim off foam and fill sterile jars, leaving 1/4-inch headspace. Adjust lids and process 5 minutes in a boiling water canner.

Yield about 5 half-pints.