



## Harvest of the Month

# Blueberries



## Social Sciences

Blueberries are a widely distributed group of plants native to North America. Although the first cultivated crop of blueberries was not successfully grown until 1912, they were an important source of food for Indigenous Americans for thousands of years prior. The story of how modern commercial blueberry cultivation came to be starts with the daughter of a New Jersey cranberry farmer, Elizabeth White. As early as the late 1890s, Elizabeth was interested in the blueberry's potential as a cultivated crop, however, most other growers at the time did not believe they could be domesticated. In the early 1900s, a USDA botanist named Frank Coville began to study North American blueberry species with an intent to develop improved varieties for commercial cultivation. Coville discovered that blueberries require very acidic soil conditions, which was previously not understood. Reading this, Elizabeth White contacted Coville in 1911 and offered acreage on her family's cranberry farm for research and development, partnering with Coville to lay the groundwork for our modern blueberry varieties.

*Arándano* means blueberry in Spanish.

## Botany

Blueberries are members of the genus *Vaccinium*, which hosts more than 35 species native to North America. There are *Vaccinium* species adapted to a wide range of climates; from the warmer climates as far south as Mexico, to the northern species distributed throughout Canada and Alaska. All the cultivated varieties of blueberries originate from these wild species; the growth habits and climatic considerations of these cultivars will be similar to their wild ancestors. Today, wild blueberries are semi-cultivated on large tracts of land called barrens in Canada and the northeastern US.

## Nutrition

Blueberries are often called a “superfood.” Their deep-blue hue comes from anthocyanin, a phytochemical which acts as an antioxidant. Antioxidants help protect your cells from damage caused by free radicals, which are unstable molecules linked to aging and chronic illness. The anthocyanin found in blueberries may help protect the body from heart disease and Type 2 diabetes, offer cancer-fighting benefits, promote gut health, and reduce inflammation. Research also suggests regularly eating blueberries may improve memory and delay age-related cognitive decline.



[Blueberry Smoothie Recipe](#)

## Growing Tips



To grow blueberries successfully it is important to choose cultivars that have been developed for your climatic conditions. In California these are most often the Southern Highbush blueberries as they meet most of the requirements for growing in the western climates. They are well adapted to our low-chill winters and have a high summer heat tolerance.

Blueberries yield much bigger crops when paired with another variety and can cross pollinate. So if you have room, grow two different cultivars.

**Planting:** To grow their best, blueberries need very specific soil conditions. If you want to grow blueberries in the ground take the time to prep your soil at least 6 months in advance, working to lower the pH down to around 5.5. They also like to grow in actively decomposing organic matter. But, to make growing blueberries easier, don't plant them in the ground. Blueberries make a wonderful container plant and this makes it much easier to control soil conditions. Dave Wilson Nursery offers the following recipe for a blueberry potting mix:

- 1/3 pathway bark (1/4 inch)
- 1/3 peat moss (coarse, if you can find it)
- 1/3 leaf mold or forest humus based potting soil
- Mix together and add 2 tablespoons of soil sulfur

**Care:** Apply a layer of acidic mulch, such as pine needles, wood chips, or pine bark, around the base of the blueberry plants. This helps maintain soil acidity, conserve moisture, and suppress weeds. Provide 1-2" of water each week throughout the active growing season. In late winter or early spring begin fertilizing with an acid-loving complete fertilizer at the recommended rates.

**Harvest:** Blueberries are ready for harvest when they are plump and fully colored. Harvest yields will vary based on the variety, if there has been cross pollination, and the age of the plant. You may need to protect your harvest from birds by covering plants with bird netting.