

Try your hand at berry picking this summer
By: Corine Burgess

One of the childhood memories that I cherish is my siblings and I picking berries. My dad was an avid outdoorsman and he used to take us to all sorts of places and have us pick every kind of berry until we thought our fingers would fall off. I seem to recall rolling of eyes and grumping and complaining, but now that I look back, I realize what a special time it was. The whole family would jump in the truck and our mission was to find a “gold mine” of berries. Once we collected enough to satisfy my dad, we would head home with a relieved sigh. It is tough work picking all those plump fruits. But it certainly was worth while when mom made her delicious blueberry cobbler or muffins for us to eat fresh and hot out of the oven.

Summer is fast approaching and with the heat comes the berries. Blueberries originated in eastern North America. Many areas of Florida including pine flatwoods and swamps are laden with several varieties of this juicy fruit. And picking them isn't just for the memories; berries are generally high in vitamins and very good for you.

Wild blueberries have the highest antioxidant capacity per serving when compared to over 20 other types of fruit. But what, you ask, is an antioxidant? According to Wikipedia, an antioxidant is “a molecule capable of inhibiting the oxidation of other molecules. Oxidation is a chemical reaction that transfers electrons from a substance to an oxidizing agent. Oxidation reactions can produce free radicals. In turn, these radicals can start chain reactions. When the chain reaction occurs in a cell, it can cause damage or death.” Basically, antioxidants help our bodies protect against disease and age related health problems. They neutralize the free radicals and help prevent our cells from being damaged.

Some claim that these miraculous molecules protect against Alzheimer's disease and other age related ailments. Nutrition experts claim that when you eat healthy foods, such as blueberries and other colorful fruits and vegetables, it will help with weight management, reduce risk of cancer, diabetes and other diseases.

It's great to eat healthy. But these berries are just plain scrumptious. They grow just about everywhere and they are free! And wild blueberries are a bit different from their tamer, cultivated relations. Wild blueberries are not planted and you may find several different varieties in one area. Wild blueberries contain more of the antioxidants per serving than cultivated varieties. They are usually sweeter and taste more intense. Of course, they are much smaller than the planted type, but they hold less water so you are getting a lot more “berry” per fruit. The wild berries hold their shape, color and texture better when using them for cooking. They also freeze very well.

Blueberries usually start blooming and producing fruit in mid-May. They generally stop producing around September. Although the fruit may be the reason for seeking out the plant, the bush itself is quite attractive. In the fall, the foliage turns a brilliant reddish color and is quite beautiful as a landscape plant. Since this plant is native to Florida, it makes an excellent, hardy choice when planning for your landscaping needs. Check with your local nurseries for the native variety.

So, now you may be ready to journey out on your own adventure and find some berries. Where do you start? Look for the right area. Blueberry plants love the sun, so you will need to find a sunny patch. Look in the summer months; that's when you'll see the dark blue berries on the branch tips. You can find blueberry bushes in the scrub communities, pine flatwoods and even in some wetlands. Just remember not to damage nearby vegetation while you're hunting for those blue berries! And watch where you step, blueberry bushes are often found near Prickly Pear cactus plants. Ouch!!

Perhaps its time to create some memories for your kids or grandkids and take them out "berry pickin." I know I intend to take my son out and share that childhood experience with him this summer. I may get the eye roll and the "I'd rather play on the computer" speech, but I feel sure that once we're out in nature together, picking the bluish black berries, we'll share a great experience that he will hopefully share some day with his children.