

Community Horticulture Fact Sheet #73b Wild Berries

Among the common wild edible plants, berries are probably those that are tried first by people. The Pacific Northwest is fortunate to have many wild fruits available to gatherers.

The following edible berries and small fruits are found in Western Washington:

Blackberry The trailing blackberry is our only native blackberry. It has weak, bluish stems and is often found in fairly deep woods. Its berries are not large or over-abundant, but are delicious. The Himalayan and Evergreen blackberries are the ones we commonly see by the roadsides. (And, all too often, they come up in our gardens from seed sown by passing birds.) The fruit is big, delicious and plentiful.

Cultivated blackberries, such as Marionberries and Loganberries, are crosses of various wild blackberries. The “improvements” are not that significant (other than the thornless types) in my opinion.

Blackcap – These delicious wild raspberries are the favorite of many wild food fanciers. Like a cultivated raspberry, the berry pulls away from the white “core” as you harvest. The most common is black when ripe, though there is one that matures red.

Blueberry These deciduous shrubs with bluish black berries in the late summer are more common in the mountains than the lowlands, but they are worth travelling to collect. Keep your eyes and ears open while harvesting; they are a favorite of bears.

Cranberry and Lingonberry These low-growing plants, usually found in bogs, have tiny, evergreen leaves. The juicy, red berries are small, but seem large for the plants. They are not very sweet, but useful as a snack or in various cooked dishes.

Currant Currant fruit is edible, I’ve never found it very tasty.

Elderberry Clusters of tiny, seedy, bitter, bright red elderberry fruit must be cooked before eating, since raw berries may cause nausea. Blue elderberries are less common, but much more useful.

Huckleberry There are two common lowland huckleberries. The evergreen huckleberry has small, leathery, toothed leaves and dark purple-black berries. They are most common near salt water. They don’t ripen until fall and then hold well on the plant, so they are a nice winter treat.

Red huckleberries are found further inland and often grow out of rotten logs or stumps. Because of their flavor and abundance, they were very popular with native peoples. They are slightly sour fresh, but make excellent pies and “raisins”.

Indian plum One of the first plants to flower, clusters of chartreuse flowers appear before the leaves in spring. The fruit looks like a tiny plum as it turns from pink to dark blue. I find them slightly bitter until very ripe, by which time the birds may have already eaten them. Since they are mostly pit anyhow, it’s no great loss.

Kinnikinnick Commonly planted as an evergreen groundcover in dry, sunny sites. The flavorless red berries are edible, but mealy and full of rather large seeds.

Oregon grape This shrub can be tall (6+ feet) or low (under 2 feet). Its compound, holly-like leaves, bright yellow flowers and long-lasting blue berries make it a popular landscape plant. The clustered fruit is tasty and easy to harvest, but tart and filled with relatively large seeds. With plenty of sugar, the juice makes a good lemonade-type drink or jelly.

Rose Hips These are the fruit of the wild rose found in open meadows. The rinds of the hips can be eaten raw. Cooked hips are better if the seeds are removed before using in teas, jams or jellies. Rose hips contain high levels of Vitamin C.

Salal Extremely common, leathery leafed plant of the Puget Sound area. The sweet berries taste and can be used like blueberries.

Salmonberry These berries can be golden or reddish orange. There is equal variety in the flavor of the berries with some being much better than others are. They are most valuable because they are earlier than most other berries (June). They are very delicate, so pick them into a shallow container or the weight of the top layer will turn the lower ones to mush.

Serviceberry, Juneberry or Saskatoons This tall deciduous shrub has pretty white flowers in the spring and sweet, blueberry-like fruit in August. If you don't eat them, the birds will.

Strawberry Needs no introduction. There are several kinds, but all are excellent though small.

Thimbleberry Their big, fuzzy maple-like leaves make this caneberry distinctive, as does the fact that it is blessedly thornlessness. Again some of these red raspberry-like plants are more flavorful than

others. Sometimes they are quite enjoyable and other times the somewhat hairy fruit seems bland. I often ignore them, if there are other berries to be had.

Make sure of the identity of the plant before you start sampling. Be sure not to pick berries if the plants look like they might have been sprayed with an herbicide. And, of course, get the property owner's permission before harvesting on private property.

Sample widely before harvesting in earnest, since flavor often varies. In general, plants in the sun, but where they get plenty of water, usually will be the biggest and sweetest.