



Blueberries important to economy

By Robert Naczi

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Fittingly, blueberries are ripening now at the time we celebrate our nation's independence. Blueberries are one of the relatively few fruits native to the U.S.A. that are extensively cultivated and of major commercial significance. Other economically important fruits with American origins include cranberries, certain grape species, persimmons and paw-paws.

Cultivation of blueberries is a relatively recent effort with nearby origins. Only since 1911 have blueberries been intensively cultivated. The early selection and breeding of superior strains of cultivated blueberry plants took place in the New Jersey Pine Barrens.

Elizabeth White, daughter of a cranberry grower in the Pines, had been enjoying blueberries she picked from the wild for years. She dreamed of growing fields of bushes loaded with big berries. So, she enlisted local residents of the Pine Barrens to search the woods for plants that bore the biggest fruits they could find, and take her to see them.

To aid them in their quest, she handed out small boards with varying sizes of holes in them, and asked them to set their sights on berries that would not pass through the largest holes. She used the big-berried discoveries in breeding programs to develop cultivated varieties, which she named for the folks who discovered the giants.

In 2007, New Jersey produced 54 million pounds of cultivated blueberries, valued at \$90 million. New Jersey ranks second to Michigan in annual production of this crop. Other states with high levels of production of cultivated berries are Georgia, North Carolina, Oregon and Washington. Most cultivated blueberries are the Highbush Blueberry, *Vaccinium corymbosum*, which grows up to 15 feet tall.



Submitted photo

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Garden Tales

Blueberries harvested directly from the wild are important to the economy, too. Maine leads the nation in production of wild blueberries. Most wild blueberries harvested for sale are Lowbush Blueberry, *Vaccinium angustifolium*, which grows to only 20 inches tall.

As you can imagine, harvesting lowbush berries is back-breaking. Those who do it swear the delicious berries make it worth the trouble. Indeed, lowbush berries are sweeter and have a more intense flavor than highbush berries.

Not only are blueberries delicious, but they have high concentrations of antioxidants. Antioxidants are beneficial to human health because they combat some degenerative effects of aging. In fact, the antioxidant levels of blueberries are among the highest known for any fruit. The antioxidants in blueberries are particularly helpful for maintaining healthy vision.

Interestingly, blueberries and cranberries are close relatives. In

fact, both are members of the genus *Vaccinium* of the Heath Family (*Ericaceae*). The Highbush Blueberry grows wild in many places throughout Delaware, and is fairly common. Lowbush Blueberry is native to Delaware, too, but has not been observed in the state for several decades. Four other *Vaccinium* species are native to Delaware, including cranberry.

Acidic soils with a high sand and organic matter content are best for cultivating blueberries. Peat works well for augmenting organic matter, if needed. Blueberry plants tend to yield the most fruit when they are grown in full sun and the ground is kept moist.

As we celebrate the red, white and blue, savor the blue fruit!

Editor's note: Dr. Robert Naczi is curator of the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium on the campus of Delaware State University. The herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations and uses. Call (302) 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, and call (302) 857-6450 (Dr. Naczi) for more information about this article.