

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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[e-mail:makeith@ifas.ufl.edu](mailto:makeith@ifas.ufl.edu)**Blueberries: A Healthy Pick for the Summer**

July was proclaimed National Blueberry Month by the USDA on May 8th, 1999.

Since blueberries are native to North America, our Indian population was enjoying them long before that, and we've not stopped since! They are grown in 35 states, and the United States produces over 90% of all of the blueberries in the world, almost 38,000 tons a year.

Since Florida blueberries are harvested between April and May our blueberry season is all ready past. Sorry, you'll have to wait till next year to pick your own - to travel north. There are fresh berries from the Northwest now. The last of the harvest in Canada won't happen until October. Meantime, there are plenty of top quality frozen berries, or even canned blueberry pie filling if you're desperate. With an assortment of flavors from slightly sweet to tart and tangy, blueberries are jam-packed with flavor and nutrients. They also happen to be very low in calories. So it's always a good time enjoy blueberries.

The Native Americans believed that blueberries were sacred because the end of each berry forms a 5 point star. They believed that they were sent from the "Great Spirit" to relieve hunger during the famine. They knew that blueberries were good for your health. Blueberry tea was supposed to relax women during childbirth. The leaves from the blueberry bush were used to make a blood purifier that was good for the kidneys. The juice of blueberries was thought to be good for coughs.

Modern medicine is rediscovering the health benefits of blueberries. They are packed with powerful antioxidants which destroy harmful substances in our bodies called free radicals. Free radicals are by-products of chemical reactions that can lead to cancer and other age related diseases. The pigment that gives blueberries their intense blue color is thought to be responsible for a lot of the health benefits. Researchers with the USDA found that blueberries rank #1 in antioxidant activity when compared to 40 other fresh fruits and vegetables. Just one-half cup of blueberries offers as much antioxidant value as 5 servings of peas, carrots, apples, squash or broccoli. All that for just 40 calories!

Whether it's because of the antioxidants or some other ingredient, blueberries seem to help maintain brain function too. At least in rats, when they were fed blueberry extract they were able to remember longer what they had learned, and learn new tricks faster, compared to rats fed other fruit or vegetable extracts. We are better off eating a variety of fruits and vegetables all year long, but it's always good to emphasize the freshest fruits of the season.

When shopping for blueberries look for fairly firm, sweet-smelling berries with no signs of mold or mildew and no crushed berries in the box. Store loosely covered in the refrigerator. Use the berries within two weeks, but preferably as soon as possible. For best flavor and aroma, let refrigerated blueberries warm to room temperature before serving.

The secret to successful freezing is to use berries that are completely dry. Place rinsed berries on a paper towel-lined cookie sheet and allow to totally dry. Freeze until solid. Now you can put them in a zipper-locked bag and store in the freezer. Kept frozen, berries will make great eating for months to come.

So, whether fresh or frozen, store bought or fresh picked, find ways to add this super fruit to your diet. This recipe will do for a quick breakfast or afternoon pick-me-up any time of the year. It's so simple you can teach your children to make their own too.

Berry Blue Smoothie

2 Cups fresh or slightly thawed frozen blueberries	1 Cup low fat vanilla yogurt
1 Cup skim or 1% milk	3 Tbsp honey
1 6-oz can unsweetened pineapple juice	1 ½ Cups ice cubes

In an electric blender, place blueberries, yogurt, milk, pineapple juice and honey; blend until smooth. Add ice cubes, a few at a time, blend until finely crushed. Serve immediately.

Yield: 4 - 5 servings

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