

Bountiful Berries!

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Chisago County Master Gardener

It's the time of year to enjoy the succulent taste of locally-grown strawberries, raspberries and blueberries. Many people have good results growing strawberries and raspberries. Blueberry growing presents a challenge for most gardeners because the plants need special conditions. They require acidic, well-drained soils, which aren't commonplace in most area landscape situations. Information on specific cultivars (cultivated varieties) is available at your local County Extension Office.

Blueberries

Some blueberry cultivars for Minnesota (agriculture zones 3 and 4) include: Northblue, Northcountry and St. Cloud. As with any fruit, different cultivars are best suited for different things. Some are better for fresh eating, while others are better for baking or freezing.

The harvest season for blueberries extends for two to four weeks depending on the weather, crop size and plant vigor. The blueberry fruit turns blue before it's fully ripe. Growers usually allow 20-30 percent of the crop to ripen before beginning the harvest to avoid picking too much unripe fruit. Pick berries that are completely blue. It's also important to pick only when dry and to keep handling to a minimum. Following these practices will prevent the whitish, waxy surface bloom of the berry from rubbing off. This prevents mold from growing. Store the berries between 32 to 40 degrees.

Raspberries

There are many cultivars of raspberries that can be grown successfully in Minnesota. Common types are Latham, Killarney, Heritage and Nordic. All of the cultivars vary as far as freezing quality, fruit size, flavor and usage in jam or jelly. When harvesting, pick berries that easily fall off the stem. Gather berries every two days, as they will rot quickly once mature. If you're unable to pick them as they ripen, rest assured that birds and other wildlife, even your family dog, will enjoy eating them right off the stem for you!

Wash raspberries only when you're ready to eat them. If washed and stored, the flavor will be greatly diminished. To save berries, spread on a cookie sheet so they're not touching and place in freezer. When frozen, transfer to freezer bags or vacuum seal to keep frozen longer.

Strawberries

Strawberries are highly-attractive plants that will produce plenty of fruit for fresh eating, freezing, jam and desserts. Three types of berries are readily available. June-bearing (Allstar, Annapolis) produce a large, concentrated crop in late spring. Everbearing types (Ft. Laramie, Ogallala) produce two smaller crops, one in late spring and the second in early fall. Day-neutral plants (Tristar, Tribute) are capable of producing fruit throughout most of the growing season.

Harvest when berries develop a full, rich color and are slightly soft to the touch. Berries that have white on them should be left for the next picking. Pull them off the vine with stems and caps intact. Pick berries when temperatures are cool, either in the morning or evening. The fruit won't be as mushy or juicy. Berries that will be used for dipping should be picked with long stems and placed on flats. The stems should not touch other fruit. Avoid nicking or bruising fruit. Transport immediately to shade or indoors. Berries should be stored at 32 degrees. After a few days in storage, fruit may lose some color, shrivel and lose flavor.

Freezing

Freezing is one of the best methods of food preservation as it maintains taste and color. Wash fruit in running water, handle delicately and drain thoroughly. Thaw frozen fruit in the refrigerator. Use fruit when it still has ice crystals in it; completely defrosted fruit can be mushy. Do not store fruit longer than 12 to 18 months.

Drying

Drying fruit is another method of preservation. It removes moisture and slows action of enzymes so the food shrinks and becomes lighter. When food is ready for use, add water. Drying is a slow process that usually involves a food dehydrator. Dried foods can be kept for between four and twelve months, depending on storage. Store in a cool, dark area. Dried fruits can be eaten as nutritious snacks or soaked in water for use in recipes.

Whether you grow your own fruit, go berry picking at a local farm or buy fresh fruit from a stand, the uses are endless. Berries can be enjoyed in many ways. My favorite way to use fresh berries is in a smoothie. Try this healthy and delicious drink and see for yourself!

Berry Smoothie

1 cup frozen berries of choice
1 cup soymilk (I recommend Vanilla Silk brand)
1 T sugar
½ t vanilla
1 t ground flaxseed

*Blend in a smoothie maker or blender and enjoy!

PLANT CLINICS: Volunteer Master Gardeners will be available Mondays from 4-7 at the Extension Office in North Branch at 38780 Eight Ave. to answer your gardening questions. You can also call 651-674-4417 during these hours to speak with a Master Gardener. Samples can be dropped off during the day on Monday if you cannot stop in during clinic hours. *Please note MONDAY is the only day you can drop off samples, as there is no longer staff at the North Branch Office who can answer gardening questions.*

VOICE MAIL: You can leave a question for a volunteer Master Gardener at 651-674-4417. Depending on the volume of calls, they try to respond within a couple of days. During office hours ask for the Master Gardener voicemail, after hours, select ext. 18. You can also get your question answered on the web at: www.extension.umn.edu/askmg