

# Nutrition News

VOLUME 7, No. 6

A COMMUNITY NUTRITION PROGRAMS NEWSLETTER

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## Benefits of Blueberries

**Did you know that July is National Blueberry Month?** In 1999, the U. S. Department of Agriculture proclaimed it so. Blueberries are native to North America and are grown in 35 states, including Louisiana. The United States produces more than 90 percent of all of the blueberries in the world!

### Health Benefits

Recently, the health benefits from blueberries have received a lot of attention. Native Americans used blueberries for many ailments. They believed blueberries helped women relax during childbirth, and it was used for coughs and for kidney ailments. Modern medicine has discovered that blueberries help prevent urinary tract infections (UTI) in the same way that cranberries do. They may also help prevent the eye disease, macular degeneration due to the high antioxidant content.

Eating blueberries may help you live a healthier, longer life, too. Research has shown that foods that are rich in antioxidants may help protect against disease, including certain types of cancers and heart disease. Antioxidants are substances and nutrients found in some foods that can prevent damage to your body cells or repair damage that has already been done. According to the USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging in Boston, blueberries are among the fruits and vegetables with the highest level of antioxidants. That means that a serving of blueberries has more antioxidants than other fruits and vegetables to fight aging, cancer and heart disease. Benefits of eating

blueberries include improved vision, clearing arteries, strengthening blood vessels and slowing or reversing some effects of aging, including motor-skill and short-term memory loss.



Blueberries are also low in fat, sodium and calories. Only 40 calories are in one-half cup! Blueberries contain nutrients like potassium and iron as well as being an excellent source of vitamin C. They also provide dietary fiber. In a one-half cup serving are 2 grams of fiber, which is about equal to the amount of fiber in one slice of whole-wheat bread.

### Choosing the Tastiest Blueberries

Blueberries are available from mid-April through early October with varieties in Louisiana ripening the first week of June.

When choosing blueberries, select berries that are dark blue and have a waxy, silvery skin. Sweetness varies by variety. Blueberries should be picked when ripe; they do not ripen after they are harvested. Frozen blueberries are available year-round and can be used in any recipe that calls for fresh blueberries. If a recipe calls for canned blueberries, you can make your own by using 2 ½ cups of fresh blueberries, 1 tablespoon corn starch, 1 ½ teaspoons lemon juice and 1/8 cup water. Cook the mixture until it is thickened and clear. Cool it before using it as a substitute.

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## **Preparation and Storage**

Preparing and storing blueberries properly can ensure your supply will last a long time. Here are some tips on how to protect this powerful little fruit:

### **Preparation**

- Handle the berries gently to avoid bruising them. Bruising causes them to become mushy and shortens shelf life.
- Discard berries that are too soft or decayed.

### **Storage**

Refrigeration:

- Do not wash the berries before refrigerating. They should be washed just before using.
- Keep blueberries refrigerated in a covered container. Store them loosely in a shallow container to allow air to circulate and to prevent the berries on top from crushing those underneath.
- Store them in a cool, moist area of the refrigerator, such as in the vegetable keeper. This will help extend their shelf life.
- You may keep them up to 10 days.

Freezing:

- Do not wash the berries before freezing. If the berries are washed prior to being frozen, their skin will become tough.

- For longer storage, freeze the blueberries in their original containers. Slip the container into a resealable plastic bag. Squeeze out as much air as possible; then place in the freezer. If you prefer, transfer the berries into resealable bags or containers. Another easy way to freeze berries is to spread them out in a single layer onto a cookie sheet. Once frozen, blueberries should be transferred to a freezer bag or in an airtight container.
- Rinse the frozen berries when you are ready to use them.
- Unused portions of frozen blueberries should be returned to the freezer promptly.
- You may keep them up to two years.

Fresh or frozen blueberries are a great treat during the hot summer months. Since July is also National Picnic Month, using blueberries in salads, desserts or as a sauce to pour over ice cream can add fun to any picnic.



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**July 2008**

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. The Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

This material was partially funded by USDA's Food Stamp program. The Food Stamp program provides nutrition assistance to people with low income.

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