

Blueberries

Vaccinium spp.

Super food of the 21st Century

Blueberries are thought of as a *superfood* of the 21st century, but were consumed by Native Americans for more than 10,000 years. They were eaten fresh, dried and stored, and stewed. Moreover, leaves, flowers, roots and stems were used in a range of medical applications. They passed on their knowledge of

blueberries to European immigrants to North America but it was not until the early 20th century, 1912, that blueberries were successfully cultivated.

Worldwide there are about 450 species of *Vaccinium*, mostly from the more northern, cooler regions of the Northern Hemisphere. As well as blueberries, *Vaccinium* also includes cranberries, bilberries, lingonberries and huckleberries. All commercial species, hybrids and varieties of blueberries come from North America.



Blueberries Photo: Leigh



Distribution of *Vaccinium* in North America.

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[10.21273/HORTSCI.48.4.413](https://doi.org/10.21273/HORTSCI.48.4.413).

compiled from [Vander Kloet \(1988\)](#).

In the *wild*, blueberries grow as prostrate shrubs and produce relatively small berries, generally referred to as *lowbush* (meaning *wild*) *blueberries*. *Cultivated* blueberries grow on taller bushes referred to as *highbush* *blueberries*. Berries of both types are commercially harvested.



Cultivated blueberries Photo: Leigh Staas



Blueberries had great cultural, spiritual and economic significance. The fruit was used in puddings and cakes and dried blueberries were sometimes added to a mix of tallow, dried meat to make the calorie-rich food *pemmican*. Berries were preserved by drying in the sun and dried leaves were chewed to give a mild narcotic effect. Blueberries grow best in full sunlight, so Native Americans would periodically burn forests and woodlands to generate open areas for blueberries. Another advantage of these blueberry *barrens* was that Native Americans were able to hunt browsing animals, such as deer and moose that were attracted to the open areas.

In 1615, five years before the Pilgrim Fathers crossed the Atlantic Ocean to settle in North America, French explorer, Samuel de Champlain, recorded Native Americans along the shores of Lake Huron harvesting and drying blueberries for use over winter. Subsequently, Wampanoag Indians taught the Pilgrims how to collect the fruits in summer and how to dry and store them to sustain them through the winter. Without the Wampanoag, the English settlers would not have had the successful harvest that would be the basis of the *First Thanksgiving*.

Blueberries belong in the section *Cyanococcus* of the genus *Vaccinium* of the plant family Ericaceae, members of which characteristically grow in acid soils of heaths, bogs and acidic woodlands. You may be surprised to know that Rhododendrons belong to the same plant family as blueberries.

We may not have blueberries in Australia, but we do have a native Australian *Rhododendron*, *R. lochiaie*, found in humid cloud forests of the Wet Tropics of far North Queensland. Perhaps of more interest and of more relevance to blueberries, is the abundance of Australian *native heaths*, related to blueberries, although in a subfamily, Stypheliodeae (previously Epacridaceae) of the Ericaceae. Many of these native Australian species



Australian *Rhododendron* species, *R. lochiaie* Melburnian, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>. via Wikimedia Commons

have succulent fruits (drupes) that were an important food source for Indigenous Australians.



The similarity to blueberries is evident in the fruit of the Australian Tree Heath, *Trochocarpa laurina*. Fruits are eaten by birds, Lewin's Honeyeater and Pied Currawong, but are not recommended for people.



Styphelia tubiflora – Red Five Corners - one of the many Australian native heaths with edible fruits.

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Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaccinium>

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