



# Huckleberry: A Brief Introduction to Harvesting and Marketing from Small Private Forestlands in the Pacific Northwest

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## Overview

Pacific Northwest forests are home to several species of wild huckleberry (*Vaccinium* spp.). Closely related to the cultivated blueberry, the fruit of the huckleberry is harvested and sold fresh, frozen, dried, or canned. The berries are also found in processed consumer products such as jam, tea, wine, syrup, honey, candy, pies, muffins, pancakes, fruit filling, salad dressing, soaps, lotions, shampoos, and candles. This report is tailored to owners of small forestlands interested in supplementing their income from the sale of huckleberry. It briefly describes how to identify, harvest, process and market huckleberries.<sup>1</sup> Although huckleberry has value in many kinds of markets, from medicine to floral greenery, this document focuses on the fruit of huckleberry as a food.



Cascade huckleberries are an abundant and delicious wild food found in higher elevations forests. Photo by Eric Jones.

## How to Identify Huckleberry

There are at least 12 different species of huckleberry, both native and non-native, found in Pacific Northwest forests. The following lists six of the most common species:



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**Alaska blueberry** (*Vaccinium alaskensis*) is found in Douglas-fir, fir-spruce, and hemlock-sitka spruce forests at low-to-subalpine elevations from northern Oregon to Alaska. It is a deciduous shrub that grows up to 6 ft. tall, with elliptic leaves, and urn-shaped, bronzy-pink flowers. The fruit is a round, blue-black, sweet berry.



Photo by Eric Jones

**Red huckleberry** (*Vaccinium parvifolium*) is found in mixed conifer forests at low-to-subalpine elevations from central California to southeast Alaska. It is a deciduous shrub that grows from 6 to 12 ft. Leaves are smooth, gray-green, and oval. The flowers are urn-shaped, waxy and yellow-pink, white, or green-yellow. The fruit is a red translucent berry, somewhat tart and sour, used to make pies, jellies, and jams.



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**Ovalleaf huckleberry** (*Vaccinium ovalifolium*) is found in mixed coniferous forests at low-to-subalpine elevations from Oregon to Alaska, Idaho and Montana, as well as eastern Asia and northeastern North America. It is a deciduous tall, bushy shrub, and grows from 1.3 to 12 ft. Leaves are oval. Flowers are urn-shaped and pink. The fruit is a blue-black berry with a whitish bloom. The berries may be tart and are often made into jellies and wine.



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**Evergreen huckleberry** (*Vaccinium ovatum*) is found in coastal forests at low elevations from central California to British Columbia. It is a multi-branched, evergreen bushy shrub, 1.5 to 15 ft. Leaves are thick, oval, glossy, and dark-green with serrated edges, with the underside dull and lighter in color. Flowers are pink to white. Fruit is a small, shiny, purple-to-black berry. The fruit is sweet, but can be mealy and musky, and is used more often in pie fillings, wine, canned or cooked than eaten raw.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the production, processing and marketing of huckleberry, a detailed market analysis is available in Vasquez, S. and L. Buttolph. 2010. "Huckleberry Market Analysis: A Business Planning Guide for Small Woodland Owners," available free at [www.ntfpinfo.us](http://www.ntfpinfo.us).



Multiple Sources

**Big huckleberry** (*Vaccinium membranaceum*) is found in coniferous forests at mid-to-high elevations from California to Alaska, and east to the Rockies. Ranging in height from 1.5 to 3.5 ft., this shrub forms clumps. The leaves are elliptical, green, and hairy on the underside with serrated edges. Flowers are white, creamy, or yellow-pink. The fruit is a black-to-purple berry and can be eaten raw, dried, frozen, canned or made into jam.



Photo by Eric Jones

**Cascade huckleberry** (*Vaccinium deliciosum*) occurs at subalpine-to-alpine elevations in the Coastal Range from central Oregon to southern British Columbia. It is a low, bushy shrub less than 1.5 ft. The leaves are oval, finely serrated, smooth, and rounded at the end. The flowers are solitary, pinkish, with urn-shaped blossoms. The fruit is a sweet blue-to-black berry.

## Harvesting and Processing

Most species of huckleberry are harvested in mid-to-late summer, with red huckleberry harvested earlier in the summer, and evergreen harvested in the fall after frost. Berries can be picked by hand or with a huckleberry “rake” that gently sifts the berries into a bucket while leaving the leaves on the bush. Collected berries are placed in a bucket or locking-top cooler. After harvesting, berries should be sorted to remove stems and leaves, with care taken to avoid tearing the skin. Avoid washing berries, as water will reduce the shelf-life. Sorted berries should be refrigerated at 41° F, and delivered to the buyer within two days after harvest. They will last up to two weeks refrigerated after harvest. They can also be dried, frozen, or processed into other value-added products, such as jam and syrup. If your forestland has huckleberry habitat you may want to consider taking steps to improve conditions and expand the number of plants in your future management. Your local forestry extension agent can help you with this planning.

## Marketing

There is a growing interest in wild, local foods among health-conscious consumers interested in sustainable lifestyles. As a wild and local food, potential markets for huckleberry include restaurants and resorts, specialty grocers, farmers’ market shoppers, and tourist and gift shops. If you have fresh huckleberries, take some samples to some of these local buyers. Chances are they will be happy to buy them from you. Other markets include direct web sales, international sales, consolidation buyers and processors. Consolidation buyers (which include co-operatives or private buyers) will buy from many producers to fill large orders. Prices may be low, but revenue is more predictable and there are no marketing and processing expenses.

A number of factors affect the prices for huckleberry including reliability, cleanliness, seasonality, and level of processing (fresh, frozen, dried, or value-added). Working with a buyer in advance will help to identify some of these variables so they can be planned for. The table lists sample prices from 2009 for huckleberry products.

Sample Huckleberry Products Prices, November 2009		
Form	Price/Unit	Source
Fruit, Raw	\$6-8/lb	<a href="http://www.opb.org/programs/oregonstory/harvest/market/page.2.html">www.opb.org/programs/oregonstory/harvest/market/page.2.html</a>
Fruit, Frozen	\$13.33/lb	NWWildFoods.com
Fruit, Frozen	\$11/lb	OregonMushrooms.com
Syrup 8 oz	\$7.99	OregonMushrooms.com
Jam 10 oz	\$7.99	OregonMushrooms.com

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