

Huckleberry

What could be more rewarding than wandering through the woods and finding a bush covered in ripe huckleberries? In the Northwest, there are more than 12 species of this tasty berry, which range from the coast to the high mountains. Huckleberries are one of the most important traditional foods and also one of the healthiest.



Other names: Whulshootseed: (blue huckleberry) wədaʔx̣
(red huckleberry) stixʷib

Identifying Huckleberry: Huckleberries come in many sizes. Dwarf whortleberry (*Vaccinium scoparium*) is a mere six inches tall and is covered in tiny red berries that would satisfy a mouse, while the bigger mountain blueberries and huckleberries are large enough for a bear to gorge on and get full. All huckleberry fruits have a circular “crown” on the opposite side from the stem. Berry colors range from orangey-red to purple to deep blue-black.

Red Huckleberry *Vaccinium parvifolium*. You will find red huckleberry growing from nurse logs in shady forested areas. It grows to 12 feet tall. Stems are green colored and the deciduous leaves are limey green with smooth edges. Only young leaves remain on the bush throughout the winter. Greenish-white bell shaped flowers bloom in April through July. Pink to orange-red fruit is round and up to 1/2 inch in diameter. Berries are ripe in June to August and are usually harvested right off the bush.



Evergreen Huckleberry *Vaccinium ovatum*. You will find evergreen huckleberry in gravelly or sandy soil in evergreen forests, open woodlands and clear cuts. This bushy evergreen shrub grows to 8 feet tall. Leaves are leathery with toothed edges and a strong central vein. Flowers are white to pink and bell shaped. Berries are dark blue to black, about 1/4 inch in diameter, and are ripe in August through November when most other berries have passed. They are sweetest after the first frost.

Many people cut whole stems of evergreen huckleberry that are covered with ripe berries. Evergreen huckleberry benefits from some pruning and the small berries are time-consuming to harvest, so many people prefer to do this at home. Make sure to take less than 20%



of a plant, and act as if you are pruning it. Cut stems at an angle with sharp clean clippers. Proper pruning will help the plant to be more healthy and productive next year!

While most types of huckleberries cannot be cultivated, the evergreen huckleberry is an exception. These handsome bushes prefer partial sun but will also grow in full sun. Many nurseries carry evergreen huckleberry and they are common landscaping plants in public spaces.

Huckleberry Medicine

Wherever you go in Indian country, people will tell you that *their* huckleberries are the best kind of all. This shows us how important huckleberries are to the culture. Many people look forward to summer as the time of berry picking. Huckleberries are not only one of the most important cultural foods to Salish People, they are also one of the healthiest. Blueberries and huckleberries do not raise blood sugar and are an



important food for pre-diabetics and diabetics. They are high in antioxidants, which help protect the body from the effects of high blood sugar including diabetic retinopathies, kidney damage and poor tissue healing. Recent research studies suggest that blueberries and huckleberries also lower cholesterol, slow age-related dementia and reduce tumor formation. They are also excellent for heart health and can ease varicose veins and hemorrhoids.

Huckleberries and blueberries contain arbutin, a plant compound that helps to fight bacteria often associated with urinary tract and bladder infections. The berry juice or the leaf tea can be used as a preventative and a treatment.

If you cannot gather your own huckleberries or blueberries, you can buy them frozen in most stores throughout the year. They are relatively inexpensive to buy in bulk at food coops. If possible, buy wild harvested or organic berries. You can add them to hot cereal, sprinkle them on cold cereal, or mix them into dressings, sauces and desserts. Cooking them actually increases their antioxidant content. The recommended daily amount for health benefits is 1/2 cup a day.

Rubel blueberries are available at many plant nurseries, which are close to huckleberry in antioxidant content and flavor.

Huckleberry leaf tea: Huckleberry and blueberry leaves are as high in antioxidants as the berries,



and they can help to lower blood sugar levels. Harvest the leaves in spring through summer when they are fully developed and still a vibrant green color. Prune a few branches off each bush, and then hang them in a warm dry place out of the sunlight. When the leaves are fully dry, strip them from the branches into a basket and then store them in paper bags or glass jars. Use 1 tablespoon per cup boiled water and steep 10-15 minutes. Drink 2-3 cups a day. The leaves will last about a year.

Big Huckleberry

“The berry to this day is considered by some to be worth its weight in gold. The nutritional value alone places this food gift in a very unique category, the medicinal properties which can address some really serious health issues among Native communities in the 21st century.”

-Warren KingGeorge, Muckleshoot Indian Tribe



Identifying Big Huckleberry: Big huckleberry (*Vaccinium membranaceum*) is a deciduous shrub that is typically two to four feet tall. It has oval shaped, finely toothed, somewhat translucent greenish-yellow leaves that taper to a fine “drip tip.” The urn-shaped blossoms are round, wider than long, and pinkish white. They bloom just after the snow melts, and are pollinated by long-nosed bumblebees. The fruits are shiny, about ¼” around and very dark purple.

Plant taxonomists recognize fourteen species of *Vaccinium* in the Pacific Northwest, some of which share the same habitat as big huckleberry. These include oval-leaf blueberry (*V. ovalifolium*), which has oval leaves and a silvery “bloom” on the dark blue, rather tart berries; Cascade blueberry (*V. deliciosum*), which has steely blue berries, is very low growing and is typically found in colder areas; and grouse whortleberry (*V. scoparium*), which is also low growing and an indicator of colder habitats, but has tiny red berries. All of these are edible, but many big huckleberry enthusiasts will argue that none are as delicious or nutritious.

Where it grows: As you climb in elevation from the lowlands and foothills on the west slopes of the Cascade Mountains to about 4000 feet, western hemlock and western red cedar give way to dense stands of Pacific silver-fir and mountain hemlock forests, which occasionally open out to beautiful meadows of big huckleberry. In the late summer when the air is tinged with the cool breezes of fall, the sweet, blue-black fruits can be prolific. In relatively open meadows, big huckleberry may produce up to 100 gallons per acre of delicious and highly nutritious fruit in a single season!

How to Harvest: Harvesting big huckleberry is not complicated if you know where to find them. All that is required is a container to gather them in, patience, and a friend who is generous enough to share the location of their favorite gathering place! Choose a container that you can hang around your neck to leave both hands free for gathering. If you are not lucky enough to have a woven gathering basket, a coffee can with rope attached, or a one-gallon plastic milk jug with a strap attached to the handle and an opening cut near the top of the jug opposite the handle will do.

Although some people use huckleberry rakes to harvest the berries more quickly, many elders believe that berry rakes damage the bushes by stripping the leaves and therefore should not be used. Walk carefully in berry patches to avoid breaking branches and damaging the plants, and be sure to move around and take just a few berries from any one location. In that way, we ensure that we leave enough food for all of the other critters that rely on this tasty fruit. Finally, watch out for bears!

If you are lucky enough to have gathered enough huckleberries to preserve for later use, you may want to can or freeze them. Canning does not require the addition of any sugar or syrup, but heat processing does destroy some of huckleberry's nutrients. If you have enough room in your freezer, the easiest way to preserve berries is to freeze them on cookie sheets, then save them in airtight plastic bags.

Eating Big Huckleberry: Northwest Coast people have been journeying to the mountains for at least 6,000 years to harvest this delicious fruit. Many Native communities historically held a berry ceremony where an elder or community leader would determine when the berries were ripe, and the people would honor that food before it was harvested.

The berries were traditionally gathered in hard, coiled cedar-root baskets that were suspended from the neck, and then smoke-dried or dried in the sun on hides or smooth, flat rocks. Once dried, the people would pack the little raisin-like fruits in large baskets and cover them with leaves for the journey back to their winter villages. There they would be stored "as is," or reconstituted with a little water and formed into loaves and put away for the winter, when they would be eaten without further preparation or added to soups and stews. Each family may have harvested enough berries to put away as much as 10 gallons of the dried fruit in a given year. Big huckleberries are especially prized today for their health enhancing properties. Unlike many other fruits, this berry is loaded with antioxidants and does not raise blood sugar, so it is an excellent choice for diabetics.

While big huckleberry season is an important food gathering time, it is also an important social gathering time. In the past, people would stay in the mountains for three or four weeks at a time during huckleberry season. Particular places were well known and drew large groups of people from a wide area year after year. In this way, the berry meadows were places of ecological and cultural diversity where a variety of activities took place, including the making of marriage arrangements between families, trading, games of skill and chance, and horse racing.

Ecological Relationships: Big huckleberry needs sun in order to produce its fruit in abundance. It is tolerant of fire – in fact, it was one of the very first plants to return to the slopes of Mt. St. Helens after the mountain erupted in 1980! Northwest Coast people were well aware of big huckleberry's need for sunlight. Historically, they would burn the meadows where big huckleberry grows to prevent trees from encroaching on them.

For many plants and animals, big huckleberry meadows are an oasis of food and light in an otherwise densely forested landscape. Deer and elk, black and grizzly bear, mountain beaver, marmot, and other small mammals, as well as several species of resident and migratory birds, rely on the foliage and fruit of big huckleberry and the other plants that grow along with it. Northwest Coast people also hunted all of these animals during their stay in huckleberry camp. Along with the big huckleberry, the people also gathered many other plants for food, medicine and basketry, some of which are found only in the mountains.



Additional Resources:

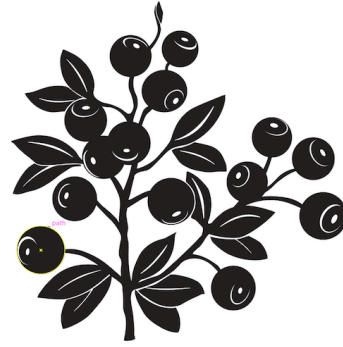
Huckleberry video: <https://vimeo.com/190192508>

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Huckleberry Medicine

A Coast Salish Story as told by Roger Fernandes, Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe



A long time ago a man had a daughter who became very sick. She was unable to eat and was in great pain. The family tried all the remedies they knew, but nothing worked. She became sicker every day. She was becoming weaker.

The family called for Indian doctors to come and treat her. They tried all their medicine, but nothing worked. She became sicker. The man was afraid she would die if a cure was not found.

One night, before he went to sleep, the man prayed to the spirits to please help his daughter.

A plant came to him in a dream that night. The plant taught him a song. The plant told the man to go up into the mountains the next morning, singing the song. When he knew it was time, he should stop singing and the medicine he needed would be there.

The man awoke and went into the mountains, singing that song. He went a long way, but finally knew he should stop singing. He looked down and there was the Huckleberry bush. The man picked the berries and took them back to the village. The girl was too weak to eat so he pressed the juice from them and had her drink the juice. She got a little better.

The next day he mashed the berries and feed them to her. Again, she felt better. Finally after several days she was able to eat the whole berry. She was well now.

The people asked what he had done and how she got better. He explained about the dream and the berries. The people did not believe him. They said it could not be from a simple berry.

That night the man had another dream and a voice spoke to him. It said that the juice of the huckleberry is the blood of the earth and the bush is the veins. The man then knew that huckleberry is a powerful medicine. He shared the dream with the people and they believed what the dream said.

And that is all.

Huckleberry Smoothie

Smoothies are a delicious way to get nutrients into your body. They are fast, fun, and easy to make for both adults and children.

- 1 banana
- 1 c. frozen huckleberries (Add 8 ice cubes if using fresh)
- 1/2 c. nut milk (vanilla almond is especially delicious)
- 3/4 c. orange juice (or 1Tbsp. OJ concentrate +3/4c. water)
- 1/2 c. yogurt (optional protein)
- 1/2 tsp. cinnamon (helps balance blood sugar)



Combine ingredients in blender. Blend until smooth. Pour into glasses and enjoy! Try adding 1/2-1 cup of greens to your smoothie, like kale, baby spinach or frozen nettle. Be sure to blend these first with some liquid to ensure smooth, even blending.

Prep time: 5 minutes. Serves 2

Recipe from Elizabeth Campbell, Spokane Tribe

Huckleberry Balsamic Vinaigrette

This simple and delicious dressing can be used on salads or as a sauce for wild game including deer and elk. Try drizzling a little on vanilla ice cream.

- 1/2 cup fresh, canned or frozen and thawed huckleberries or blueberries
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil or walnut oil
- 1 teaspoon honey
- pinch of salt and pepper

Blend all ingredients in a blender until smooth. This will dress a salad for 4-8 people.

Recipe from Valerie Segrest, Muckleshoot Tribe

Wild Berry Crisp

This tasty dessert boasts fillings of antioxidant rich fruit and is topped with heart-healthy oats and nuts. Just thinking of potential combinations of fruit filling is deliciously satisfying. Try making a double batch and storing half in the freezer for another wild berry crisp day. It can go straight from the freezer to the oven.



Filling:

- 6-8 cups of berries (strawberry, huckleberry, blackberry, blueberry or a combination)
- 1/2 cup of honey, maple syrup, xylitol or sugar as sweetener
- 2 tablespoons corn starch or 1/4 cup all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon of lemon zest or two teaspoons of lemon juice

Topping:

½ cup all purpose flour or barley flour

1-½ cups rolled oats

½ cup chopped walnuts

½ cup chopped hazelnuts

2 tablespoons butter

½ cup honey, agave nectar or rice syrup

1/8 teaspoon sea salt

½ teaspoon cinnamon

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Mix the filling ingredients and spread evenly in a 9 by 12 inch baking pan. Roast flour, oats and chopped nuts by stirring them in a dry skillet over medium heat until they are heated through and are just beginning to brown. Remove from heat and place in a bowl. Heat butter and honey, then pour over the dry mix. Add salt and cinnamon. Mix well and drop evenly over the berries. Bake for 30-40 minutes or until the berries bubble and the topping is crisp.

Cook time: 1 hour. Serves: 8-10

Recipe from Elise Krohn