

# village view

by Andrea Leonard

Blueberries are ripe! And this year there's a bumper crop. Apparently our unusually early spring and the copious rains in June were the perfect combination to bring the blueberry to its maximum production.

Anyone with a plastic bowl or a tin cup can gather enough blueberries for a pie in 20 or 30 minutes' picking. In even less time you can gather enough for a batch of blueberry muffins or a bowl of fresh berries with cream.

Where do they grow? There are cultivated plants grown by several farmers between West Barnstable and Sandwich on Route 6A. There are also wild bushes growing along the sides of nearly every street, road or highway on the Cape.

Cultivated blueberries are larger, juicier, and sweeter than the wild ones; it takes fewer to make a pint. The wild berries, however, have more flavor and make better eating since the slightly acid taste gives a zest and tang that's missing from the tame ones.

When setting out to gather blueberries, wear shoes or sneakers on your feet; the places they grow thickest are often home for briars and other thorny vines. Also a threat to bare feet are bits of glass from broken bottles tossed from passing cars.

A likely spot for berrying is along the service road that parallels Route 6. You'll be in little danger of traffic accidents for the service roads aren't heavily traveled, and no one will arrest you for trespassing.

Look high and look low. There are several different types of plants that produce the fruit. The low-bush ripen earliest and the plants are hardly more than ankle-high. You'll know them by the intensely blue fruit growing in a cluster of six or seven at the tips of twigs. The leaves of all blueberry bushes are oval and unlobed, and the undersides are veined, the upper sides quite smooth to touch. The leaves may be slightly sawtoothed on the edges.

There is a medium-sized bush, ranging from knee to waist high. The leaves are often a lighter shade of green, and the berries may be a lighter shade of blue and somewhat lar-

ger than the fruit of the lowest growing variety.

Topping them all are the high-bush blueberry bushes; these are usually at least 6' tall, and in some places grow twice that high. They bear prolifically, and the berries are often as large as cultivated ones, and equally as sweet and juicy. Although these high-bush blueberries grow happily in shady woodlands, they bear best when their roots are firmly buried in sharp sand at the edge of a freshwater pond.

The Latin name for the blueberry genus is *Vaccinium* and there are more than 20 species; most of these are native to Cape Cod.

A little later in the season huckleberries will ripen. There's a school which prefers huckleberries to blueberries, not objecting to the stone-hard seeds inside. Looking much like blueberry bushes, but bearing bright shiny black fruit of about the same size, the huckleberry is a different variety of plant entirely. Its botanical name is *Gaylussacia*, and the most common species on the Cape is *G. Baccata* which grows about 3' high.

There's a garden variety of huckleberry, *Solanum nigrum Guineense*, sometimes called the sunberry or wonderberry. This annual plant resembles mature asparagus and is grown like tomatoes in the garden. The fruit of the cultivated huckleberry is blue-black, and while too bitter for eating raw make an extra-flavorful pie. Each plant will yield enough berries for one pie.

Ways to use either blueberries or huckleberries in your menu are not limited to pies, of course. Either can be eaten out-of-hand as they come from the bush, or with cream and/or sugar, alone or with other fruit. In combination with other fruit, they add color as well as flavor.

The Indians used to dry blueberries in the sun and use them in puddings and cakes as we might currants or raisins. Dried for a week or ten days, they can be stored like raisins, and are immune to decay. If there's spare space in your freezer, dry-pack them in plastic containers for a taste of summer next February.

The berries make fine jelly, especially if cooked up with sour apples which provide natural pectin. And blueberry jam on hot blueberry muffins is an unforgettable breakfast treat. Blueberry jam as a topping for vanilla ice cream isn't a bad dessert, either.

How do you make it? Try this: for each cup of blueberries use ½ cup of white sugar. Make a syrup of the sugar and enough water to dissolve it (about equal parts). Bring the syrup to a boil. Put the clean washed blueberries in the boiling syrup, and boil slowly (careful it doesn't boil over) for 20 minutes. Pack and seal immediately in sterilized jars.

Why go to the trouble of picking your own blueberries? Because, like the mountains people climb, they're there. Out there along the side roads, through the woodlands, along the edges of the hundreds of ponds on the Cape, there are gallons and gallons of the fruit, free for the taking.

You can go to the supermarket and buy a basket; sure you can, if you want to. Why buy something that you can freely have for the picking? Use the price of the box of blueberries for an extra-nice cut of meat, and end up with the best of both.

While you're picking, you're getting some exercise. You're outdoors and surrounded by the natural beauty of the Cape in summer. It's one of the pleasures of living here.

While you're picking, you're learning things about the world we live in. You'll notice the differences between the kinds of plants that produce blueberries. You'll also notice other plants that don't have berries or, at least, not blue ones.

You'll have a chance to learn the difference between checkerberry with its bright green leathery leaves and red edible berries that taste like chewing gum, and pippisewa, a lovely small wild flower with lancelike green and white striped leaves, and a delightfully fragrant flower. Don't pick it; enjoy it.

You may find star flowers, Indian pipes, mushrooms that look like gray or white sponges, growing up through the pine-needles under your feet. If the ground is boggy or damp you may find a rare clump of shin-leaf, a white wild flower with a dozen or so blossoms on an eight inch stem. Its bright green leaves are round and lie almost flat on the ground with very short stems. The leaf was once believed to help heal bruises and scratches, hence the name.

There are so many good reasons for gathering your own blueberries that if there weren't so many of them, if nature weren't so generous with them, I wouldn't even tell you about them.

I'd jealously guard the secret of their existence so I could have them all for myself. Since there's plenty to go around, I'll share them.