

Go Wild For Fresh-picked Blueberries

Tallahassee Democrat

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What could be more delicious on a warm summer day than fresh picked blueberries? Not only are they delicious, but they contain more disease-fighting antioxidants than practically any other fruit or vegetable, even antioxidant-rich foods such as kale, broccoli, and oranges. Though naturally quite sweet, blueberries are so low in calories, even people trying to lose weight can enjoy them. In fact, their high-fiber content makes them very satisfying. Blueberries are rich in phytochemicals which are powerful antioxidants that may slow the aging process, help reduce the risk of diseases such as heart disease, cancer, and Alzheimer's. Latest evidence shows that blueberries, in particular, may slow the aging process associated with memory loss.

Fresh blueberries are plump and firm with a light silvery "bloom". This bloom is a natural protective wax coating on the berries. Select blueberries that are uniform in size and free from leaves, stems and other debris. The fruit should be dry, since moisture hastens decay.

Blueberries don't ripen after they're picked, so be sure to select fully ripe berries. Ripe blueberries range in color from light blue to blue black. Reddish or green blueberries are not fully ripe and have a sour flavor. Overripe blueberries have a soft, watery, lifeless appearance. Those that have been stored too long look similar, but may also be shriveled.

Handle blueberries with care. They are perishable and should be refrigerated until they are used. To prevent mold growth and decay, don't wash blueberries until just before they're used. Simply store them loosely covered in the refrigerator. When stored properly, they should keep for up to two weeks.

For freezing blueberries, simply remove any leaves, stems, defective or immature berries. Pack the unwashed berries in moisture-vapor resistant packaging, leaving 1/2 inch head space. Seal and freeze and don't forget to wash before using them.

It's easy to include blueberries in your diet each day — start early with blueberries for breakfast. Just a half-cup of blueberries on cereal or blended into a smoothie is a delicious and antioxidant-rich way to get fruit into your daily diet. Frozen blueberries are easy to use right out of the freezer and according to the FDA, are just as healthy as fresh; in fact they may even retain their nutritional value longer. What's more, they are versatile, intensely flavorful and available year-round.

Blueberry Smoothie

1 pint fresh blueberries or 2 cups (10 oz.) frozen blueberries -- slightly thawed
1 cup pineapple or orange juice
1 container (8 oz.) low fat vanilla yogurt
2 teaspoon sugar

In the container of an electric blender, combine blueberries, juice, yogurt and sugar. Blend until smooth, about 1 minute. Serve immediately in tall glasses. Garnish with blueberry skewers spiraled with thin strips of orange peel, if desired.

Have a question? Contact the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office at (229)734-3015, weekdays 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 5 p.m.

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