

# Blueberries

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Nutritionally, the blueberry is a nutrient dense food, packing vitamins, fiber, and phytochemicals into a low calorie package. Phytochemicals are plant compounds found in a variety of fruits and vegetables that many researchers feel may prevent disease by protecting the body against damage by free radicals. Blueberries contain the well known antioxidants vitamin C, vitamin E, and beta carotene in addition to the phytonutrient anthocyanidin, the blue/red natural pigment that is being investigated for its role in fighting aging, cancer, and heart disease. Some of the most recent studies on the compound anthocyanidin involve how phytochemicals may affect memory and macular degeneration. As a family member to the cranberry, blueberries also contain the compounds that help prevent urinary tract infections (UTI) for some people.

The blueberry bush is a native plant to North America and was used in many foods historically by Native American tribes. It was eaten fresh as well as dried and added to soups or stews.

Blueberries are currently grown commercially in 38 states although 90% come from just five states including Oregon and Washington. This fruit of a shrub plant in the bilberry/cranberry family grows in clusters on bushes that can produce up to

6,000 blueberries per bush each year. Varying in size from a pea to a marble, the ripe blueberry has a purple-blue to blue-black color and tastes sweet and tangy. Blueberry season in the Northwest runs from May to October, peaking in July and August.

When buying blueberries, look for berries that are a deep blue-purple color and slightly firm to the touch. The berries generally last about one week when stored unwashed in a covered container in the refrigerator. Wash them as you use them to decrease the chance that the berries get soft in the refrigerator. Stock up on blueberries when they are in season and freeze them unwashed in freezer bags for use later. Many of us enjoy eating blueberries plain by the handfuls, but there are many other ways to incorporate blueberries in your diet as well. Try them in a smoothie, toss them on top of a green salad, sprinkle them on top of cereal or granola, top your yogurt or ice cream with them, bake them in muffins, pies or cobblers, or toss them with other berries to make a beautiful fruit salad.

While scientists search for more answers to chronic diseases such as cancer and heart disease, eating a wide variety of foods remains a prudent plan for consumers. Serving some fruits and/or vegetables in every meal can help insure that your diet is plentiful in all the vitamins and phytonutrients that plant foods contain. Choosing nutrient dense fruits and vegetables such as the blueberry is a healthful way to eat locally while adding flavor and color to your diet.

## 1 cup of fresh blueberries

**84 calories**

**3.6 g fiber**

**15 mg Vitamin C**

**80 IU Vitamin A**

**47 mcg beta carotene**

