

Get ready to pick: It's blueberry season

Farmers from the greater Capital Region are revving up for the berry's peak time, plus how to use those berries once you pick them

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Blueberries in field at The Berry Patch on Tuesday, June 20, 2023, in Stephentown, N.Y. The Berry Patch uses a different kind of netting system to keep insects off. (Lori Van Buren/Times Union)

Whether you have a small child or not, thumb through a copy of Robert McCloskey's classic "Blueberries for Sal" and you'll be happy that summer — in particular, blueberry season — is here. And if there is a child anywhere near your kitchen, grab a copy of the brand-new "Blueberries for Sal Cookbook," the sweetest recipe book published this year.

Blueberries, like McCloskey, may conjure up Maine, but lucky us who live in the Capital Region: the Harvest Connection, an organization that connects local farmers with consumers, lists 39 farms in the area where we can pick-our-own or buy just-picked locally grown berries.

When can we start?

"This year they're coming a little later than last," said Dale-Ila Riggs of the Berry Patch in Columbia County's Stephentown. "The cooler weather puts our pick-your-own crop starting the second week of July." You can find blueberries from The Berry Patch at the Troy Farmer's Market and Honest Weight Food Co-op in Albany, as well as at their family farm. "I'm known around the Co-op as 'The Blueberry Lady,'" Riggs said.

So, give or take a week, but get ready. For Judy Aronstamm of Saratoga Springs, that means heading out to Winney's in Bacon Hill, just north of Schuylerville, as early in the season as possible, "when the berries are huge and juicy and beautiful." Aronstamm has been picking her own for 25 years, to make freezer jam, blueberry sauce (for pancakes, pound cake, ice cream), cornmeal blueberry muffins, and to freeze so she can use the after the season ends.

"I try to freeze enough for the whole year but if we run out, we run out. Once you've had fresh berries it's kind of hard to eat the kind you see at the supermarket in the off-season," she said.

Winney's is a blueberry institution, sporting more than 40,000 bushes that produce dozens of varieties throughout the season. Like Aronstamm, many customers are pick-your-own loyalists who start early in the morning and pick quarts and quarts. Others, like 94-year-old Ken Abrams, arrive at the farmstand by car and bring along their own bowls or containers to place on the scale to get tare weighed and filled.

Once you get your berries home, "the less you handle them, the better in terms of longevity," said Abra Berens, the author of "Pulp: A Practical Guide to Cooking with Fruit." Berens is a fan of roasting, baking, and preserving berries by pickling them, or making vinegar (see box, Preserving Blueberries). Her book is filled with innovative recipes for savory and sweet dishes featuring fruit, including blueberries. Like the rest of us, she freezes them, too, washing and drying them first (for her technique, see See Q & A with Abra Berens). Riggs does the same. "Even pesticide-free blueberries should be washed for food safety reasons. You never know what Mother Nature might have left on your crop," she said.

On Riggs' Berry Patch farm, which she runs with her husband, Don Miles, the berries are grown pesticide-free. Riggs pioneered an innovative tenting system with fine-mesh netting and double-doors to enter and exit that covers the farm's entire blueberry and raspberry plantings. "It keeps out the tiny invasive insect called the Spotted Wing Drosophila that would otherwise ruin our crops or require us to spray," she said. Entering the tent is like a slice of blueberry heaven. "You walk through the doors into this space with bushes dripping in berries," a pick-your-own customer said. "The environment is so peaceful and calm."



Dale Ila Riggs is seen in a blueberry field at The Berry Patch on Tuesday, June 20, 2023, in Stephentown, N.Y. The Berry Patch uses a different kind of netting system to keep insects off. Riggs is co-owner with her husband Don Miles. (Lori Van Buren/Times Union)

It's an innovation that Riggs is passionate and proud of. "Invasive pests are a huge issue for the industry and the general public," she said. "We have devised a system that allows us to produce a huge crop despite being surrounded by an invasive insect that destroyed 40 percent of our crop when it first arrived. Because SWD causes organic growers to spray every four to five days and conventional growers to spray every seven days, there's tremendous interest in combatting the problem." (Because conventional farmers have a wider arsenal of pesticides available to them, they spray less often than organic farmers do, Riggs said, albeit perhaps with stronger compounds.)

With grant money, Riggs teamed up with University of Vermont Extension and Cornell AgriTech to produce a series of YouTube videos on how others can adapt her SWD Exclusion Netting

system (now in its 10th year at The Berry Patch). She also lectures around the country, sharing her experience and know-how for having found a solution to the SWD problem. “Never before has an invasive pest been beaten in a short period of time without spraying it into oblivion,” Riggs said.

The Berry Patch and Winney’s are just two of the 39 farms listed by The Harvest Connection on their website, Harvestconnection-NY.com, where you can search for locally grown blueberries. The season is frustratingly short, usually over by Labor Day. So, ready your pails: It’s time to fill them up. Kuplink, kuplank, kuplunk.

Q & A with Abra Berens

The author of “Pulp: A Practical Guide to Cooking with Fruit,” talks blueberries.

Q: As a fan of your books “Ruffage and Grist” I was thrilled to see your new one, “Pulp,” all about fruit. Your sense of humor and guidance without a heavy hand make reading the book a pleasure. And the recipes using blueberries in savory dishes was a revelation. Now that blueberry season is here, what are you doing with them?

A: I’ve been really loving blueberry and oat together — berries paired with oatmeal or granola certainly, but also boiled oats and blueberries in salad. Same for buckwheat. I’ve been making a lot of buckwheat grain bowls and folding blueberries in with radicchio and other leafy greens.

Q: I like your method of freezing berries first on a tray and then transferring to sealable bags. Do you wash them before freezing?

A: I do give them a wash and let them dry. When eating fresh, I wash just what I’m going to eat/use because in general the less fruit is handled the better in terms of longevity. But it is

impossible to wash frozen fruit without making a mess, so I give a wash. Allow to dry so that water clinging to the berries doesn't freeze. And then freeze.

Q: I know that asking you what your favorite berry is like asking who's your favorite child, but what's your favorite berry?

A: Ha. Most of the time blueberries are my favorite berry. They are so easy to grab and eat, and my toddler can eat them without making a mess (mostly)! Blueberries are just the epitome of summer ease – grab a handful before heading out for a sit in the yard. Topping ice cream on a summer night. They are just summer.

Q: Any tips or tricks for getting the purple out of your hands after a day spent with blueberries?

A: Usually a little bit of lemon juice helps me get the stain out of my cuticles. Or just leave the dishes to really stack up and after a 30-minute session of washing dishes, the stain is gone.