

## Highbush Blueberry: The State Fruit of New Jersey

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On January 12, 2004, governmental legislation was signed into law and highbush blueberry was recognized as New Jersey's official state fruit by Governor James E. McGreevey. New Jersey senate bill S-2678 had been combined with assembly bill A-334 and passed the state legislature with overwhelming support. This legal process was stimulated by two fourth grade classes from Veteran's Elementary School in Brick Township, NJ, where the students learned that the Garden State did not have an official state fruit.

This selection of highbush blueberry was particularly interesting and knowledgeable. There are only three Native American fruits—blueberry, cranberry, and grape. The botanical ancestors of the highbush blueberry originated over 100,000 years ago in the Northeastern United States and were prized by birds and mammals as a rich food source. Native Americans, particularly the New Jersey branch of the Leni Lenape Tribe, were especially fond of wild blueberry for sustenance and use in dyes. Their original legends believe that the Great Spirit sent the "star berries" to relieve famine. There is a star-shaped structure at the bottom of the berry. While the Native American dried these fruits for a year-long storage, today consumers primarily eat them fresh or use them in juice, jelly, jams, pastries, and pies.

In the early 1900's, Elizabeth White, a cranberry grower in Whitesbog, New Jersey, formed a cooperative breeding effort with Dr. Frederick Coville of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elizabeth paid local residents to search the swamps and woodlands of South Jersey to find the best looking and tasting wild blueberry bushes. These species were primarily the northern highbush blueberry, *Vaccinium corymbosum*, but several other common



names were used at the time as blue huckleberry, swamp huckleberry, and high blueberry. Miss White and Dr. Coville replanted these wild selections alongside her cranberry bogs and cross-pollinated the best blueberry bushes in order to produce plants superior in shape, size, vigor, and fruit quality. These early cultivars spurred the development of an entirely new agricultural industry. After a century of applied research, many of these selections are still being cultivated today.

New Jersey is the birthplace of the agricultural transition of the wild blueberry plant into the cultivated highbush variety. Currently, New Jersey farms about 7,500 acres of highbush blueberries with sales of over \$45 million in 2003.





Commercial blueberry fields in springtime flower are quite fragrant and scenic.

These statewide sales surpass that of peach, apple, and grape. Nationwide, New Jersey is number two in terms of blueberry sales, with Michigan being number one, North Carolina number three, and Oregon number four. Rutgers University Extension faculty and the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station are continuing that applied research. The research center houses 12 world-class scientists and over 25 staff members. This group leads extensive effort to improve highbush blueberry culture and make farming practices efficient and profitable. Their website is: [www.aesop.rutgers.edu/~bluecran](http://www.aesop.rutgers.edu/~bluecran).



The Phil Marucci Cranberry and Blueberry Research Center is located in Chatsworth, New Jersey on 100 acres.

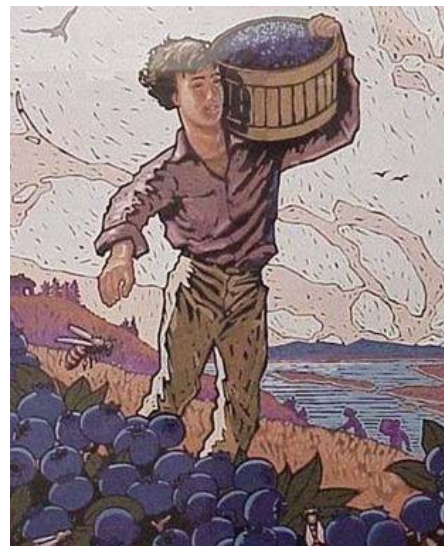
Scientists like Dr. Amy Howell of Rutgers have revealed some of the impressive health properties of this small fruit. Blueberries have a high level of antioxidants, which help prevent cellular degradation and aging. The berries are high in fiber, low in calories, low in cholesterol. Phytochemicals may help inhibit cancer growth and bacterial infections.

To capture a sense of what New Jersey life was like in those early times and where this agriculture began; visit the restored town of Whitesbog and see the original settlement amidst a scenic Pine Barrens background.

Tour the freshwater cedar bogs and woodland understory and understand where the native heritage of this small fruit started.

When one experiences and enjoys this natural environment during harvest times

from May through July, you are better able to appreciate the historical value of this legendary, "Jersey Fresh" food crop; the highbush blueberry—our official state fruit.



For further information on cultivating blueberry varieties in the home garden, please refer to fact sheets FS106, *Blueberry Pest Management for Home Gardens*, FS750, *Establishing Blueberries in the Home Garden*, and FS419, *Selecting Blueberry Varieties for the Home Garden*. If there are further questions, contact your county agricultural agent through the local Rutgers Cooperative Research & Extension office listed in the blue pages of your telephone book under "County Government".

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