



I'm your huckleberry

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Huckleberries are sold fresh, frozen, dried or canned. The fruit is also found in products such as jam, tea, wine, syrup, honey, candy, pies, muffins, pancakes, fruit filling, salad dressing, soaps, lotions, shampoos and candles.

Question: I enjoy gathering wild huckleberries every fall. Is it possible to grow huckleberries in my home garden?

Answer: Pacific Northwest forests are home to several species of wild huckleberries.

Huckleberries belong to the family Ericaceae (Heath) and the genus *Vaccinium*. Some species are deciduous, some are evergreen. The most sought-after huckleberry is the thin-leaved huckleberry, *Vaccinium membranaceum*, a deciduous type.

In forests, the thin-leaved huckleberry often dominates the forest understory during early to mid-seral stages of succession. The leaves and stems of the huckleberry are resistant to low intensity fires, and if burned away they will resprout vigorously from rhizomes buried under the soil. The plant rarely reproduces via seed; rather, it usually spreads by cloning itself from its rhizome or shoots.

A common evergreen variety, *Vaccinium ovatum*, is known as an evergreen huckleberry. 'Ovatum' refers to its oval-shaped leaves.

The flowers of huckleberry are urn-shaped, waxy and



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come in colors of yellow-pink, white or green-yellow.

The fruit of the huckleberry has been harvested for thousands of years by the indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest. The berries are now sold fresh, frozen, dried or canned. The fruit is also found in products such as jam, tea, wine, syrup, honey, candy, pies, muffins, pancakes, fruit filling, salad dressing, soaps, lotions, shampoos and candles.

To grow huckleberries, the two most important factors to consider are light and soil. Huckleberries need to be planted where they receive at least 5-6 hours of sunlight. Sufficient sun exposure triggers the initiation of new flower buds for the next growing season, without which there will be no fruit.

Huckleberries also prefer a well-drained soil. They won't tolerate a wet soil. Huckleberry plants need a lot of

nutrition and organic materials such as rotted leaves, shredded bark, and organic compost. A slightly acidic soil with a pH of around 4.5-5.5 is preferred, but not mandatory.

Watering your huckleberry plants is where you need all your gardening skills. A rule of thumb is to water the soil when it gets dry, but not to overwater. Water deeply and thoroughly. Avoid spraying the leaves and shoots with water to decrease the chances of fungal infestations.

As your plants mature, make sure they get enough nitrogen. If you notice the leaves turning red, that's a symptom of nitrogen deficiency. Use a slow-release fertilizer to encourage the huckleberry bush's growth. You can apply it anytime from late spring until the end of summer.

For an abundant crop, you will need to grow more than one huckleberry plant to encourage cross-pollination. Keep in mind that your bushes need to come from different rhizomes. If you grow all the plants from the same rhizome they will be identical and cross-pollination will fail. Once the flowers bloom, the bees and butterflies will do their job and

get the huckleberry flowers pollinated.

Here are a few of the species that have great garden potential in our area:

■ *Vaccinium ovatum*: In the spring, the branches of this evergreen huckleberry are covered with clusters of tiny, pinkish-white bell-shaped flowers, followed by tiny blue-black berries. The fruit is small and it takes a good-sized portion to make jam, jelly or syrup-but it is worth the effort for their sweet, fresh flavor. The evergreen leaves are so attractive that the branches are often used in floral arrangements. Evergreen huckleberry makes a great plant. It can also be trained and shaped into an ornamental, edible hedge.

■ *Vaccinium parvifolium*: Red huckleberry is most commonly found west of the cascades in open dense forests. It has delicate, small, light green oval leaves. Tiny twigs along the branches are adorned in the spring with inconspicuous greenish-white bell-shaped flowers. The fruits are tiny, red to red-orange, and sweet-tart in flavor. This deciduous shrub will reach anywhere from 3 to 12 feet in height.

■ *Vaccinium membranaceum*: The thin-leaved

huckleberry is a fairly common understory plant in our higher elevation coniferous forest. The leaves are elliptical and somewhat larger than those of the other huckleberries. The flowers are creamy to yellow-pink bells that emerge from the leaf axis. The flowers are followed by large, purple to black, very tasty berries. In the fall, the foliage turns red to reddish-purple.

Huckleberries are often overlooked by gardeners. They make a great addition to any landscape. Granted, the domesticated huckleberries that you grow in your garden will not taste as rich or as flavorful as the varieties that grow in the wild. However, if you grow the right variety, you can have all the huckleberry jam and ice cream you want.

You can even gift them to friends.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.