



THE MIRACLE BERRY

If you add one healthy food to your diet this year, make it blueberries. Calorie for calorie, luscious blueberries have recently emerged as the single most ferocious healthy food in the supermarket at halting the forces that age you. Even the scientists who study blueberries are excited.

Radical Resistance

Every second of your life, your cells are bombarded by dangerous particles called free radicals. In a split second, they can alter your DNA in ways that cause cancer. Or change LDL cholesterol (the bad cholesterol) so it sticks to artery walls. Or damage collagen and make skin wrinkle-prone. Over time, changes such as these accelerate your aging.

Fortunately, you can fight back. The trick is to load your diet with antioxidants--the natural zappers of free radicals--by eating lots of fruits and vegetables. And that's where the incredible blueberries come in. The amazing little blueberry has emerged as nature's number one healthy food source of antioxidants among fresh fruits and vegetables.

In tests at the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University in Boston, blueberries beat out 39 other common fruits and vegetables in antioxidant power-- even such heavyweights as kale, strawberries, spinach, and broccoli. Much of that power comes literally "out of the blue"--from anthocyanins, the pigments that give blueberries their deep blue hue. Blueberries are bursting with them.

Blueberry Rx

So impressed is Ronald Prior, PhD, head of the USDA Phytochemical Laboratory at Tufts and the scientist who discovered the secret power of blueberries, that he now recommends adding 1/2 cup of blueberries to your diet every day--a far cry from our current average intake of about 2 1/2 cups a year!

"With 1/2 cup of blueberries, you can just about double the amount of antioxidants most Americans get in one day. If you want to slow down the free radical aging process, blueberries are the leader of the pack," he says. "At our house, we always keep blueberries in the freezer."

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However, Dr. Prior urges you not to choose only fruits and vegetables that are high in antioxidants. Tomatoes, for example, are fairly low in antioxidants but are a rich source of lycopene, which has been linked to lower rates of prostate cancer and heart disease. The best healthy food advice? Eat blueberries in addition to the fruits and vegetables you already eat, not to replace them.

Miracle Food for Your Brain?

The most intriguing news about blueberries is this: There's a possibility they can actually reverse the loss of short-term memory that happens as we age, says James Joseph, PhD, a USDA scientist at Tufts.

Dr. Joseph explains that as rats age, they forget how to find their way through mazes that they previously had learned to navigate. But when he and his colleagues supplemented the diets of some older rats with blueberry extract for two months, they actually improved their navigational skills in the same mazes. The rats' balance, coordination, and running speed also improved.

Though these results are still very preliminary, Dr. Joseph calls them "very exciting." The next step: to identify the compounds responsible for this effect and eventually test them in humans. Meantime, Dr. Joseph and his wife have begun eating blueberries regularly.

Urinary Tract Relief

Just like their cousin the cranberry, blueberries contain compounds that can prevent urinary tract infections (UTIs), according to recent findings at the Rutgers Blueberry Cranberry Research Center in Chatsworth, NJ.

Called condensed tannins, they can keep the bacteria responsible for UTIs from attaching to the wall of your bladder, says Rutgers scientist Amy B. Howell, PhD. And yes, she eats blueberries. "In season, I eat a huge amount--maybe a pint a day."

Berry Good for the Eyes?

In Japan, blueberries are known as "the vision fruit"--reputed to help relieve eyestrain--and

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blueberry sales there have quadrupled in the last two years, says John Sauve, executive director of the Wild Blueberry Association of North America. That's due in part to research in Europe indicating that European blueberries (bilberries) can improve night vision and help eyes adjust to bright lights.

At Tufts, Dr. Prior plans to study the ability of this healthy food to prevent macular degeneration, a disease of the retina and the leading cause of blindness in people over age 65.

Sweet, Quick, Versatile

Blueberries are really the no-work fruit--they require no pitting, peeling, coring, or cutting. And they are an outrageously healthy food. Best of all, their taste is a treat. Go blue!

10 Ways to Turn Blue

Blueberries are heavenly in muffins, pies, and other baked desserts. Or try these quick ideas for getting the antiaging power of blueberries every day:

Breakfast cereal boost. Sprinkle 1/2 cup (or more) of blueberries on your favorite cereal. If you use frozen berries, let them sit about 5 minutes before eating.

English muffin deluxe. Spread a warm muffin with softened light cream cheese. Top with blueberries.

Red, white, and blue salad. Blueberries add sparkle to any tossed salad, but this combo is especially good: On a bed of mixed greens, sprinkle low-fat feta cheese, strawberries, and blueberries. Toss with vinaigrette dressing.

Fruit cup super-combos. Blueberries make any fruit salad prettier and more flavorful. We like avocado slices, cantaloupe cubes, and blueberries with a honey vinaigrette dressing. Or try watermelon cubes, kiwifruit slices, and blueberries--delicious as is.

Blueberries and "cream." What could be simpler! Top a bowl of blueberries with low-fat (1 percent) milk. Add sugar or honey, if desired.

Dessert cooler. Blueberries are fabulous with ice cream and frozen desserts. For a match

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made in heaven, pair blueberries with lemon sherbet.

Fruity yogurt. You could buy blueberry yogurt, but instead, why not try using half low-fat vanilla or lemon yogurt and half fresh or frozen blueberries? You'll get more berries, plus terrific flavor.

Chicken salad with a surprise. Add blueberries to chicken salad dressed with low-fat lemon yogurt.

Quick blueberry pandowdy. In a glass baking dish, mix 3 cups blueberries, 1/2 cup purple grape juice, 1/2 tablespoon cornstarch, and 3 low-fat cereal bars, crumbled. Cover and microwave on high about 7 to 10 minutes until bubbly. Stir and serve hot. Serves 4 (Per serving: 189 cal, 0.5 g fat, 3.3 g fiber)

Blueberry jimmies. Kids love this one. Fill an ice cream cone with low-fat vanilla ice cream or frozen yogurt. Allow the outer surface of the ice cream to soften a bit, then roll in fresh or frozen (slightly thawed) blueberries. Wild blueberries, because they are smaller, work best.

Where the Antioxidants Are

To get the level of antioxidants found in just 1/2 cup of blueberries, you need to eat more--sometimes much more--of other fruits and vegetables: 1/2 cup blueberries = 3/4 cup strawberries 1 1/4 cups orange sections 2 1/4 cups broccoli florets 2 1/2 cups chopped spinach 2 2/3 cups corn

Go Wild

Two varieties of blueberries are now in many stores. Most plentiful are hybrid cultivated blueberries, grown throughout the US. But wild blueberries, grown in Maine and Eastern Canada, are beginning to be available nationwide in frozen loose-packs. Wild blueberries are smaller (about 1,600 to the pound versus 500 for the larger, cultivated blueberry), and their flavor is more intense. They also hold up better in baking.

When the weather is steamy, here's a treat that's cool and good for you:

Berry Smoothies

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