

Native Fruits for the Home Garden

Looking for an adventure beyond the blueberry bushes this year? Consider planting one or more of the less commonly grown native fruits. Experiment cautiously: while many native fruits may be edible, the flavor of some raises the question, “Why bother?” The four natives below share the trait of palatability as well as edibility. They are adaptable, relatively low maintenance, and may be worked into a home landscape.

Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*)

Some of my favorite childhood recollections include picking fruit from wild-growing elderberry in late summer; then waiting impatiently for my mother to make jelly from the 1/4-inch purple-black berries. The fruit, typically used for jelly, jam, or wine, is rich in iron and potassium as well as vitamins A, B6, and C. Cultivars selected for superior fruiting are available from mail-order nurseries. Elderberry is a multi-stemmed shrub that thrives in the wild in moist to wet soils, but performs reliably in drier garden soil. The plant grows in full sun to light shade and can be anywhere from 5 to 10 feet tall and 3 to 8 feet wide at maturity. Because of its coarse appearance and tendency to sucker, elderberry is best used in informal, natural landscape plantings, or kept confined to a production area. The plant does produce showy clusters of ivory colored flowers in early summer. Elderberry is hardy in zones 3 to 9.

Beach plum (*Prunus maritima*)

Residents of Cape Cod and coastal points south are probably more familiar with this native shrub than inland dwellers. Its ripe purple to reddish (or even yellow) fruit, up to 1 inch in size, contains vitamin A and plenty of cholesterol-lowering pectin. The fruit is suitable for jams, jellies, and preserves. Cultivars have been selected for fruit quality and quantity. For several years, UMass Extension has worked with Cornell University and other partners to promote beach plum as a specialty crop. To read about the history of beach plum and growing tips resulting from this cooperative project, visit www.beachplum.cornell.edu/bpguide.pdf

Hardy in zones 3 to 8, tolerant of salt and poor, dry soils, beach plum can work nicely in an ornamental setting. A mature plant is 3 to 6 feet tall and wide, and is best planted in full sun, where it will produce masses of 1/2-inch white flowers in the spring. Plan on pruning suckers to keep beach plum’s appearance neat. Plant at least two beach plums for fruit production.

Pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*)

One thing I regret from the time I spent propagating native plants for a living is that I didn’t sample more of the pawpaw fruit I collected before extracting the seed. The fruit really does taste like, as so many references state, banana custard. Ripe fruit is rather ugly, 2 to 5 inches long and green-yellow. It contains vitamins A and C, and has greater amounts of potassium, phosphorus, magnesium, and sulfur than apples, peaches, or grapes (Dirr, 1990). Cultivars have been selected for fruit production. Pawpaw grows as a small tree (in full sun and moist soil) or a multi-stemmed shrub (in shadier, poorer sites). It is hardy in zones 5 to 8. A mature pawpaw growing in moist soil can reach 30 to 40 feet in height. Pawpaw is not tolerant of droughty soil, so mulch well to conserve moisture in average garden soil. As an ornamental, pawpaw might appeal to gardeners who like curiosities. Its leaves and overall form give it a tropical appearance; its 1- to 2-inch spring flowers are a garish red-purple. Plant at least two pawpaws for fruit production.

Persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*)

While it has not been as long in development as its Asian counterpart, Japanese persimmon (*Diospyros kaki*), our native American persimmon has attracted attention as an alternative fruit crop. A single fruit, up to 1 1/2 inches in size and yellow to pale orange hued, contains more than 20% of the recommended daily allowance of vitamin C. It is suitable for making jams, jelly, baked goods (Bir [1992] gives a recipe for persimmon pudding), or wine. The fruit of the unimproved species can ripen very late in the fall (depending on the plant's origin), making a good harvest questionable for northern gardeners. However, cultivars have been selected for early ripening (mid- September), and these may be more appropriate for Massachusetts.

Persimmon is hardy in zones 4 to 9. It is a slow-growing tree, reaching up to 60 feet tall and 35 feet wide at maturity. If the garden lacks space for such a specimen, prune persimmon and it will grow as a multi-stemmed shrub in the landscape. Persimmon performs best in moist but well-drained soils, but is remarkably tolerant of dry, infertile sites. It prefers full sun. Persimmon has several features to recommend it for landscape use: clusters of fragrant, white, blueberry-like flowers in late spring, a bark textured like alligator skin, and red-purple fall foliage. Wild persimmon plants are either male or female, but some of the available cultivars are self-fertile.

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