Three cheers for the red, white and blueberries

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Good pollination, timely rainfall, and plenty of sunshine have local blueberry farmers anticipating a harvest that should give them plenty to cheer about this holiday weekend.

The picking of the sapphire-colored fruit, which began mid-June and is expected to stretch into August, typically peaks in the weeks just before and after the Fourth of July, said Joseph Martinelli of Blu-Jay Farms in Hammonton, who wholesales his blueberries through Dandrea Produce of Buena. "The quality is excellent. They're a good size and firm," he added.

Last year's statewide yield was a record-setting 54 million pounds valued at $90.2 million, according to the National Agriculture Statistics Service of the US Department of Agriculture.

New Jersey ranks second in blueberry production behind Michigan. But whereas about 80 percent of Michigan's crop is sold for processing, about 80 percent of New Jersey's crop is sold as fresh fruit, explained Gary C. Pavlis, an agricultural agent for the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Atlantic County. Almost 99 percent of the approximately 8,000 acres of blueberries in the state are grown in Atlantic and Burlington counties, he added.

"New Jersey has a real reputation for quality, fresh-market fruit," said Mark Ehlenfeldt, a US Department of Agriculture research geneticist at Rutgers University's Philip E. Marucci Center for Blueberry and Cranberry Research and Extension in Chatsworth.

Three varieties make up the bulk of the local crop, said Pavlis: Duke, which will be available until early this month; Blue Crop, which is picked during the first three weeks of July; and Elliott, which wraps up the season.

From a grower's perspective, "the prices have been very good on blueberries over the past few years," said Ehlenfeldt. It wasn't always that way, however. "There used to be a time, four or five years ago, when the prices in summer really didn't cover the production costs," he said.

Demand for blueberries took off after the USDA identified them as the richest source of antioxidants among the 40 most commonly eaten fresh fruits and vegetables. Local acreage increased in response. When Martinelli first began growing blueberries in 1986, he had about 30 acres; now he cultivates 60. Even farmers in the northern part of the state, not a traditional blueberry production area, have begun growing the fruit.

Some farmers also have begun looking for ways to broaden the availability of locally grown blueberries. To expand the scope of the business he runs with his wife, Josephine, and children, Joseph Jr. and Dominique, Martinelli has been selling blueberry preserves made from his fruit in cooperation with another outfit since 1995. Starting in September, however, he will produce his preserves, sold under the Farmers' Own label, at Rutgers University's Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton. "We're just giving blueberries to people in another way," said Martinelli. "I'm really excited about it."

Scheduled to open late this summer, the $7 million, 23,000-square-foot food processing facility will also enable growers to freeze and package one-pound bags of blueberries. Offering consumers the convenience of year-round availability of locally grown products, such initiatives help keep farmers in business, explained Diane Holtaway, associate director of client services at the center. "They can command a much higher margin in many cases on value-added products," she said.

Cynthia Dunham of Hopewell, a retired ophthalmologist and avid recipe collector, freezes her own blueberries each year. "You wash them and put them on trays until they're frozen solid; then you put them in bags," she said. One of her favorite breakfasts is Greek yogurt and blueberries with a sprinkling of nuts.
Requiring no slicing and no peeling, blueberries make for easy eating at any time of day. Blueberries dot the scones served at brunch at Avenue Restaurant in Long Branch. Sautéed with sugar just until their juice is released, they also accompany Avenue's fromage blanc cheesecake, said the restaurant's executive chef, Antonio Mora. Combined with lemon, blueberries are a colorful addition to seared foie gras, he added. "But I really like the idea of putting them in cocktails," he said. Blue Velvet, a drink that pairs fresh blueberries with blueberry vodka, lime and mint, is one of his favorite blueberry libations.

With the local blueberry season now in full swing, there should be many an opportunity to raise a glass and give three cheers.

Shopping Hints: "As blueberries ripen, the acidity level drops off," noted Mark Ehlenfeldt, a USDA research geneticist at the Philip E. Marucci Center for Blueberry & Cranberry Research & Extension in Chatsworth. "The bigger the berry within a given variety, the sweeter it's likely to be."

Look for plump, deeply colored fruit with a grayish waxy film on the skin. This "bloom" helps preserve the berries, so wash them only when ready to use. Avoid blueberry containers stained with juice, which indicates crushed or rotting fruit.

Nutrition Notes: Blueberries are rich in anthocyanins, which can suppress tumor formation, relieve arthritis, and strengthen capillaries to ensure healthy eyes and veins; proanthocyanidins, which help keep bacteria from sticking, thus preventing urinary tract infections, cavities, and ulcers; and pterostilbene, which may help lower cholesterol. The nutrient-dense fruit may also help lower blood sugar and reduce age-related mental decline. Researchers are hoping that upcoming small-scale human clinical studies will help pinpoint the fruit's actual effect on health. "Different varieties of blueberries have different compounds," noted Amy Howell, a research scientist at the Philip E. Marucci Center for Blueberry & Cranberry Research & Extension in Chatsworth.

Fun Facts: Elizabeth White of New Jersey was the first person to begin cultivating blueberries, a native North American fruit, back in the early 1900s. In January 2004, Gov. James E. McGreevey signed a bill designating the high-bush blueberry as the state's official fruit.

Product Info: Farmers' Own blueberry preserves ($19.95 for three 20-ounce jars, not including shipping and handling) can be ordered by phoning 866-561-5599.

Farm Info: For a listing of pick-your-own blueberry farms and growers who sell fresh blueberries, go to the Jersey Fresh website, www.state.nj.us/jerseyfresh/ and the NJ Farm Bureau website, www.njfb.org.

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