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# Berries - Half a Million Deer Can't Be Wrong

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GARDEN NOTES

# BERRIES - HALF A MILLION DEER CAN'T BE WRONG

*By Denis Hinkamp*

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Half a million deer can't be wrong – Utah's mountains and canyons produce tons of tasty fruits and berries. Although most of these native berries should only be consumed by wildlife, a few are actually palatable and well worth the search.

Probably the most common berry in our foothills is the blue elderberry, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. The elderberry is a large shrub or small tree that normally grows 10 to 12 feet tall. Its yellow-white flowers emerge in the early summer, and the blue-purple fruit can be very attractive, as well as edible. Although the berries can be eaten fresh, they are more commonly used in pies, jams, jellies and wines. The fruit develops a whitish bloom on it as it ripens.

A few newer elderberry cultivars are being sold in the nurseries and garden centers, he says. They make attractive additions to the landscape. The American elder generally has bigger fruit than our native plants. The cut leaf elder has attractive foliage with dark-colored fruit. American golden elder has nice, yellow-gold foliage with red fruit.

Another purple berry ripening in the foothills this time of year is the creeping Oregon grape-holly, Goodspeed says. This small shrub normally grows in the shade of taller plants. The berries from this shrub are edible, but very acrid to the taste. The cultivated Oregon grape, common in many landscapes, also has a purple, bitter-tasting berry. It is a small semi-evergreen shrub that produces bright yellow flowers in the late spring. The fall color can also be striking as the foliage turns to a purple-bronze color.

"One of my favorite native fruits is the golden currant," Goodspeed says. "This shrub grows near stream beds throughout the canyons. The fruit varies in color from a red-yellow to a dark purple-black. Currant fruit is a favorite for eating fresh, or to use in preserves or pies. Besides the redeeming value of being an edible fruit, golden currants also have wonderful fall color.

"A few local nurseries sell native currant plants as well as the Alpine currant. Both of these plants make a nice informal hedge or can be planted in groups. The common chokecherry, considered to be a weed by some people, has small fruit that is highly sought after by others. I consider the fragrant white flowers in the spring more valuable than the late summer fruit. Most

years the fruit is nothing more than a large pit covered with a dark purple to black, bitter tasting skin."

Chokecherries do make excellent jams, jellies and syrups (if you can gather enough in a lifetime to actually process it), Goodspeed says. But, between the birds eating the fruit, the trees being damaged by black knot fungus, and low production, it can be frustrating to find a good producing stand of chokecherries in Utah's canyons.

Some of these plants have been brought into the landscape where they are used as small background trees or for an informal hedge, he says A better choice may be the Canada red chokecherry. The foliage on this tree is green in the spring, then changes to a nice red-purple for the summer. One problem with the Canada red chokecherry is its habit of producing lots of suckers which grow around the base of the tree.

If you are going to sample a few of the native berries, make sure you know what you are sampling, Goodspeed cautions. Some of the berries are poisonous and should be left for the birds and other animals.

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