



Alabama's *TREASURED Forests*  
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## Wild Blueberries

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Many people enjoy the sweet taste of tame blueberries found in backyards throughout Alabama. However, there are also five species of wild blueberries in Alabama that are beneficial to people and wildlife. These five species of wild blueberries (*Vaccinium* species) are Elliott's blueberry, tree sparkleberry, dryland blueberry, ground blueberry, and deerberry. These wild blueberry species prefer acid soils, plenty of sunlight, and newly cleared land. Blueberry bushes also spring up in areas that have been recently burned. Fruits vary in color, including black, blue, green, and yellow. Blueberries ripen from August to October and often persist into winter.

Blueberry fruits are eaten by many species of wildlife including turkey, quail, ruffed grouse, black bear, deer, chipmunks, rabbits, foxes, squirrels, and raccoons. Songbird species such as the scarlet tanager, robin, cardinal, bluebird, and brown thrasher also eat the blueberry fruit. Deer readily browse some blueberry foliage with the greatest use occurring in April and May. Winter browsing also occurs in some areas.

Wild blueberry species are also important to people, and can be used much in the same manner as their domestically grown counterparts. The berries can be eaten raw, cooked, or dried. They can be added to muffins, cakes, and pies to make delicious desserts. Historically, Native Americans dried the berries and added them to a combination of pounded venison jerky and fat to make a high-energy food called pemmican. Wild blueberries can also be used to make jams and jellies.

With a nutritional value similar to their tame counterparts, blueberries contain antioxidant compounds that show promise in reversing some of the effects of aging.

Historically, one species of wild blueberry (tree sparkleberry) was used by some herbalists to treat a variety of illnesses such as high blood pressure, heart problems, and diabetes.

In summary, many of the wildlife species in Alabama benefit greatly from the five species of wild blueberries growing throughout the state. Both the fruit and the foliage provide a high quality food for wildlife as well as humans who enjoy using wild blueberries in a variety of ways. ☪



Photos by Scott NeSmith, University of Georgia, Bugwood.org