

The Fruits of Your Labor





by Noah Welhouse

Summers in Wisconsin are host to a bounty of delicious farm-raised produce. My personal favorite has to be the various berries that thrive in the dairy state. While California strawberries have been available in grocery stores for some time now, they can't compare to fresh-picked strawberries. Besides growing your own batch of berries, you-pick berry farms are your best opportunity to satisfy any berry cravings. You-pick farms are abundant throughout the state. Advertisements can occasionally be found in your local newspaper, but I recommend the glossary found on the Wisconsin Berry Growers Association's website (www.wiberries.org).



Noah Welhouse's appreciation for fine berries has only grown since this early trip to the local berry patch.

When to Pick

Different berries have various periods of fruition. Strawberries are the first berries to come into season. In central and southern Wisconsin, strawberries are usually ready in the beginning of June and continue until around the second week in July. If you live in northern Wisconsin, strawberry season starts about June 20 and winds down approximately July 15. While exact harvesting seasons for raspberries differ greatly by locale, they generally are available to pick from mid-July to mid-August (some species found in our northern woods bear fruit until late fall). Blueberries are in their prime from mid-July and the season ultimately ends in September.

How to Pick

Each you-pick farm has a different method for consumer cultivation. Some assign rows while others, like Kirschbaum's Strawberry Acres LLC in Beaver Dam, let their consumers roam free. It is wise to pick in the early morning so the berries remain relatively cool. Also, while most operations provide containers, it is wise to verify this.

Nutrition

Berries are not only delicious but are abundant in nutrients and are natural deterrents to disease. The nutrients that give strawberries their vibrant red hue have been shown to preserve cell structure and promote organ health while other compounds abate age-related loss of brain function. Also, the high ellagitannin content of strawberries has been linked to a lower rate of cancer. Raspberries are high in fiber and are a great source of vitamin K, magnesium, vitamin C, and manganese. However, the nutritional powerhouse of local berries is the blueberry. They have been listed as a "superfruit" because of their nutritional density and potential for disease impact, as well as harnessing exceptional antioxidant properties.

Prepicked

For those of us who love the taste of fresh berries but lack the time to pick them, many growers offer prepicked berries. The Wisconsin Berry Growers Association offers a variety of tips for selecting premium prepicked berries.

Optimal strawberries give off a fragrant aroma and are visibly ripe, soft to the touch but firm enough to not be considered mushy. However, as Stan Kirschbaum of Kirschbaum's Strawberry Acres points out, "This does not mean entirely red, but depends on the type of strawberry." To avoid selecting an inferior batch make sure your berries aren't overhandled and only avoid buying containers with stains. Stains are an indication of overripe fruit.

Finally

Berry picking is a fun family activity and instills a deep connection to the food you eat. Remember that nothing tastes sweeter than the fruits of your labor.

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