

THE HEART HEALTHY GARDEN

This topic is close to my heart, literally. After being diagnosed with four cholesterol-jammed heart arteries in March 2012, I underwent quadruple coronary artery bypass graft surgery less than a month later. At the same time, I was told I had full-blown Type 2 Diabetes.

The surgery went well and the long road to healing from heart disease and diabetes began. Now, thanks to regular exercise and a healthier diet, I have lost 70 pounds, the arteries that now service my heart are still cholesterol-free, the blood sugar levels are back to normal, and I no longer need to take any prescription medications for either of these ailments. Part of the secret? Growing - and eating - heart-healthy fruits and vegetables, loaded with fiber.

Most people are familiar with fiber. Fiber is a component of all plant-based foods, including fruits, vegetables and grains. There are two types of fiber: insoluble fiber, which cannot be absorbed or digested. It travels relatively intact through your body and out. Insoluble fiber helps promote regularity.

Fiber is also composed of soluble fiber, a type of fiber that dissolves in water to form a gel-like material. Studies at the Mayo Clinic and other institutions have shown that soluble fiber may help lower blood cholesterol levels by reducing low-density lipoprotein, or "bad," cholesterol levels. Soluble fiber may have other heart-health benefits, such as lowering blood pressure, blood glucose levels and inflammation.

If battling high cholesterol levels and diabetes are part of your life, ask your doctor if a high fiber diet (30 or more grams a day of fiber) is right for you.

Here are the top five fruits and vegetables with the most soluble fiber that should be part of a heart-healthy backyard garden.

Artichokes (3.2 grams soluble fiber per 100 grams). According to the UC Davis Vegetable Research and Information Center website, the globe artichoke is a perennial, cool-season vegetable that yields and produces best when grown near or along the California coast where cool to mild climates prevail. It is possible to grow high-quality artichokes in California's inland areas as a direct-seeded or transplanted annual crop. To grow artichokes in warm climates, plant seeds or transplants of **'Imperial Star'** in July for inland valley locations. To harvest, cut the bud together with 2 to 3 inches of stem. This length of stem is usually tender and edible. A mature plant produces ten or more stems during a season; each stem can provide four to five buds.

Shell Beans (1.6-2.2 grams soluble fiber per 100 grams).

This easy-to-grow summertime garden staple should be included in every yard. The horticultural bean (shell bean) is widely grown in many parts of the state. The colorful pods and beans of the horticultural bean make it an attractive addition to the garden and kitchen. The seeds of **pinto beans** look similar to those of the horticultural beans, but are smaller. They are used widely as brown beans and as refried beans in Mexican dishes. **Black beans** or **black turtle beans** make an unusual, delicious black-colored soup. They are easy to grow if given plenty of air movement to prevent the disease problems to which they are susceptible. **Kidney beans** are the popular chili and baking bean, available in deep red or white types. **Navy pea** and **Great Northern beans** are used in soups and as baked beans. Plantings of beans should be made after danger of frost is past in the spring and soil is warmed, since seeds planted in cold soils germinate slowly and are susceptible to rotting. One old nurseryman offers this tip to avoid rotting bean seeds: water the day you plant the seeds; don't water the soil again until you see the bean emerge from the ground.

Blueberries (3.0 grams soluble fiber per 100 grams).

Southern highbush blueberry varieties have a low-chill requirement and are heat tolerant. Although they are self-pollinating, blueberry fruit set will increase and berries will be larger if two varieties are planted together. Most varieties grow 4 to 6 feet tall here. A few, such as Sunshine Blue (3'), are more compact. A UC Master Gardener variety trial found that the following varieties grew the best in Northern California, produced the biggest crops, and had good to excellent flavor: **'Reveille', 'Misty', 'Sunshine Blue', 'Bluecrop', 'Georgia Gem' and 'O'Neal'**. Other varieties that may also work well include **'Blue Ray', 'Cape Fear', 'North Blue', 'Ozark Blue', and 'Sharp Blue'**. In our yard, we have had success with **Sharp Blue, Jubilee, South Moon, Blue Ray, Sunshine Blue and Misty**.

The southern highbush blueberries will thrive in containers, as long as you keep a few basics in mind:

- Plant blueberries in a good-sized container. You can start them off in five-gallon containers, but a 15-gallon or larger is preferable. We use watering troughs from the local farm supply store. With holes cut in the bottom, of course.
- Give them acidic soil. Use a one-third mix of potting soil intended for camellias and azaleas, peat moss, and small pathway bark, along with a handful of soil sulfur. This will give the blueberries their ideal pH growing range of 5.5.
- Blueberries need consistently moist soil, but be sure the pot has good drainage.
- Because containers can heat up here in the summer, place them where they can get some afternoon shade.

Apricots (1.8 grams soluble fiber per 100 grams).

According to the taste test surveys conducted by Dave Wilson Nursery, the top-rated apricot varieties include the **Blenheim, Canadian White Blenheim, Tomcot, Early Autumn, Autumn Glow**, and a couple of Apricot-Plum crosses: the **Flavor Delight Aprium** and the **Cot-n-Candy Aprium**.

Green Peas. (1.7 grams soluble fiber per 100 grams).

In the Central Valley, low foothills and East Bay, plant peas from September through March. Bush types grow in most areas of California. Do not use overhead irrigation; it increases the incidence of mildew. Harvest peas when the seeds and pods are well developed, but tender enough so they may be crushed between the fingers without separating into halves. Harvest edible pod types at the first sign of seed development. Peas over mature quickly and starch conversion continues after picking. Can or freeze peas soon after shelling. Bush peas have a shorter, earlier production period than the pole types. However, the pole types require extra work, but yield more and produce for a longer time.

Recommended varieties include: **China, snow, or sugar Dwarf Grey; Sugar Mammoth; Melting Sugar; Cowpeas (Southern peas, black-eyed peas); Snap** (thick, edible pods); **Sugar Ann (dwarf); Sweet Snap** (semi-dwarf); **Sugar Rae** (dwarf); **Sugar Daddy** (stringless, dwarf); **Sugar Snap**.

Other garden crops with soluble fiber: **raisins, carrots, eggplant, oranges, pears, peaches, strawberries, leeks, green beans, cabbage, cauliflower, peppers, potatoes, peanuts, asparagus, spinach, sweet potatoes, turnips, tomatoes, apple, melons, broccoli, corn, lettuce, walnuts, olives, cucumbers, onions, radish, zucchini.**

Listen to "Farmer Fred" Hoffman on *The KFBK Garden Show* on NewsTalk 1530/KFBK Sundays, 8:30-10 a.m.; and, *Get Growing* also on Sundays, 10 a.m.-Noon, on Talk650/KSTE.

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