



BERRYLAND (CALIFORNIA NATIVE BERRIES)

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*"One berry, two berry, pick me a blueberry. Hatberry, shoeberry, in my canoeberry.
Under the bridge, and over the dam, looking for berries, berries for jam."*

Would you like a Berryland? Who doesn't love berries and the book *JamBerry* by Bruce Degen? His book makes you think of all the berries you could have—not just blueberries, strawberries, blackberries and raspberries. You imagine so many berries you ask yourself, "What other berries could I grow?" How about gooseberries, elderberries, thimble berries, salmon berries, black cap raspberries, woodland strawberries, coffee berries, and huckleberries. Then there are manzanita, madrone, toyon, currants, Oregon grape, wild grape, choke cherry, and California wild rose.

Do you notice a pattern here? Do you remember seeing most of these plants in your native plant books? When looking for more drought tolerant, less demanding landscape choice you can have your native and eat it too. You can also provide native food for the wildlife, erosion protection, and fall color. Let's take a closer look at some of these plants, their requirements and uses.

Some of these plants can be found at nurseries (especially those focusing on natives), plant sales from native plant societies, other gardening groups, and friends. Fall is the best time to plant shrubs to let them acclimate to their environment and start growing new roots before the stresses of hot summers. When propagating your own plants, it is best to start with a cutting or seed from a friend or a purchased plant. Be aware of any laws on collecting the fruits or parts of the native plants in the wild. Many native berries start well from seed.

Lots of **currants** and **gooseberries** from the *Ribes* family are grown for fruit and ornamental purposes. Both are multi stemmed shrubs from 3 to 5 ft. And they do their best in zones 1-6 and 15-17. They can be grown in both Placer and Nevada counties, but need more shade in the hotter areas and do like more of a winter chill. Both like regular water with well draining soil and mulch—very wet conditions rot their roots.

Currants like pruning on 2nd to 3rd year branches. The most popular currants are black currants from *Ribes nigrum* or *R. odoratum*, red and white currants from *R. sativum*. The 'Wilder', 'Red Lake', and 'White Imperial' varieties are usually easier to find at nurseries and produce better fruit. More of the popular gooseberries are from European *Ribes uva-crispa*. 'Greenfinch' and 'Invecta' received awards of garden merit from the Royal Horticulture Society.

Elderberries and flowers most commonly are from *Sambucus caerulea* and *S. mexicana* the two blue elders. They can be 10 ft. x 8 ft. shrubs or up to 30 ft. by 20 ft. trees. They are grown at different altitudes, full sun to light shade, and prefer regular watering but established plants are drought tolerant. Mature plants make a good windbreak or screen in the landscape. They are host to the little known and threatened valley elderberry longhorn beetle. Elderberries bloom spring to summer and can have ripe berries and flowers at the same time used for syrups, wine, jelly, pie, pancakes, sauces, etc.

Manzanita flowers, berries, are from many different shrubs to small trees in the *Arctostaphylos* clan, found and grown in all California zones. The most common here is the *A. manzanita*. They prefer well drained, rocky to sandy soil with light shade to full sun, and light to moderate water. Flowers and berries are used for sugars, syrups, cordials, baked goods, jellies, tea, and more.

Their cousin madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*) is native to the coastal west, but can be planted in the Sierra Nevada area preferring well draining soil, full sun to light shade and moderate to regular non-alkaline water. The flowers are similar to the Manzanita and their fruit are brilliant orange to red rough coated and somewhat bland balls, both were commonly used for foods.

The very popular Strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*) from Europe has similar flowers and fruit. Being in the *Ericaceae* family, all have flowers shaped like heaths and heathers. Both manzanita and madrone have a beautiful dark red peeling bark that can be used for teas.

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Heteromeles arbutifolia known as **Toyon or California Holly** would be a great choice for the state berry. It is thought that Hollywood was named for the vast quantities of them growing in that area. They were used as a substitute for the popular holly boughs at Christmas. Usually found in scrub oak chaparral zones 5-9 and 14-24, they like full sun to partial shade, and moderate water. Fast growing, coupled with wide spreading root systems make them a great choice for erosion control on hillsides. Their spicy berries have been used by the native west coast Indians and Spanish settlers for both food and medicine. Cook the toyon berries to break down the small amount of cyanogenic glycosides, and drying helps sweeten them.

Rhamnus californica, [now *Frangula californica*] **the California coffeeberry**, prefer zones 4-9 and 14-24, do well in full sun to partial shade, aren't fussy about soil, and needs little water once established. There are upright and groundcover varieties. This long lived shrub is great for suppressing soil erosion on hillsides. The fruit are berries that turn from green to red to black and, although edible, are generally not recommended for consumption due to possible laxative effects. Amazingly, *Rhamnus* has many varieties that are adapted to different altitudes, soils and water levels so you can find the perfect plant for any spot.

Wild strawberries are also called wood, woodland, and Alpine strawberries. *Fragaria vesca* var. 'woodland', *F. vesca* var. 'Californica', *F. vesca* var. 'Virginica' are what we usually find growing natively, the alpine is native to Europe. The ornamental strawberry with yellow flowers and bland fruit is sometimes called the wood strawberry and should not be confused with the others that sport very tasty fragrant fruit. Grown in a variety of habitats, these berries are not going to replace more domestic cultivars, but are a great accent to them and well worth having for their delightful flavor and spreading ground cover attributes.

Black cap raspberries, *Rubus occidentalis*, thimble berries, *R. ursinus*, and salmonberries, *R. spectabilis* don't produce as much as a garden cultivar but add a fun surprise in the garden when they are ripe. They could add a special touch to a bowl of ice cream or simple syrup.

Oregon grapes, *Mahonia aquifolium*, and California wild grapes, *Vitis californica*, are not related but can be used for similar results in the kitchen. Both have varieties that can give you a beautiful display of orange to red foliage, and are easy to grow. They do fine on little water but could use a bit of shade in the hottest exposures. Oregon grape can be used as a garden border or low screen. The deciduous California grape can cover an arbor for summer shade, then give you great vines for winter wreaths.

Many of the berries can be dried then ground and used in cooking, added to sugar, or are a great addition to tea in a tea ball. Try making a simple syrup—put berries in a pan, cover with water, boil until fruit is tender 5-20 min. Strain out seeds and skins then add equal amount of sugar to juice and a little lemon juice bringing back to a boil for at least 5 minutes, cool and serve. Elderberries, strawberries, black cap raspberries, thimble berries, and currants can be frozen and added to baked goods at a later date.

Try using wild and Oregon grapes for a jelly. Find books with recipes and ideas for wild foods that can be used for the berries you planted. Look online for recipes or local foraging groups that can share techniques. On a last note, if you are eating any part of these plants please make sure you can properly ID them, and know what parts you can eat to be safe.

References

Sunset Western Garden Book. 2001. Kathleen N. Brenzel. Sunset Publishing Corporation.

Species: Heteromeles arbutifolia, Species: Frangula californica, Species: Arctostaphyus manzanita.
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