

HUCKLEBERRY

Sniffing out Montana's delicious purple gem

By Ellen Horowitz

BY JULY, MANY western Montana mountain ranges will be crawling with treasure hunters searching for purple gems. Armed with plastic buckets, coffee cans, or other containers, the prospectors comb hillsides from dawn to dusk. In coffee shops and cafes, they speak in hushed tones of finding “gold mines,” “mother lodes,” or “bonanzas.”

All this activity can mean only one thing: Montana's prized wild fruit, the huckleberry, is plentiful and ready to pick.

The Montana huckleberry is closely related to the blueberry, though no self-respecting Montanan would compare the two. Hardcore huckleberry lovers insist their favorite fruit is far superior to the dull, flavorless blueberry, brought under domestication nearly two centuries ago.

Plant taxonomists, however, do not consider flavor among important identifying features. Peter Stickney, curator emeritus at the University of Montana Herbarium, studied huckleberries for years and identified seven species in the Treasure State. Montana huckleberry plants range from 2 inches tall with berries the size of match heads to shrubs up to 6 feet tall with pea-sized and larger berries.

“The huckleberries most people seek are found from northwestern Montana down to the mountains outside of Bozeman,” says Stickney. These are the globe huckleberry, (*Vaccinium globulare*) and the big huckleberry (*Vaccinium membranaceum*), two nearly identical species.

Purple-tongued pickers hoping to cache a few gallons of huckleberries in the deep-freeze care less about taxonomy and more

about finding productive patches. The bigger and more abundant the berries, the faster the bucket fills.

“Northwestern Montana produces the best huckleberry picking in the state,” says plant ecologist Maria Mantis, of Whitefish. “It's tough to find any decent huckleberry picking once you leave the Flathead and Kootenai national forests and the Glacier Park area.”

Mantis says other national forests in Montana occasionally produce well, but “it's not like mountain ridge after ridge after ridge with big, fat, juicy huckleberries” common to the moister parts of the state's northwestern region. There, festivals in Trout Creek, Whitefish, and Seeley Lake honor the huckleberry each year.

However, just because the huckleberry is northwestern Montana's most abundant plant doesn't mean a person can just drive anywhere and find good picking. “It's like knowing there's fish in every creek,” says Mantis. “The challenge is finding the best fishing holes.”

Finding hucks

Big and globe huckleberries grow in the mountains at elevations between 3,500 and 7,200 feet. Mantis says to look in forests

with roughly 50 percent tree cover—lodgepole pine or mixed forests of lodgepole, larch, spruce, and subalpine fir. Huckleberries grow in 20- to 50-year-old burns, old clear-cuts, ski runs, avalanche chutes, and older, open, high-elevation forests where the plants receive the sunlight they need to thrive.

Like morel mushrooms, hucks grow abundantly in burned areas, but not the year following a fire, as is the case with morels. “Huckleberries come in very slowly after a fire,” says Stickney. “It can take 15 to 20 years for the plants to produce prolifically.” Likewise, hucks growing in areas opened through logging mature slowly and variably.

Serious huckleberriers, like Jim Riley of Columbia Falls, begin searching weeks before the roadside stands hang their “Fresh Hucks For Sale” signs. By mid-July, he's collecting along sunny, south-facing slopes at lower elevations. As the season progresses, he works his way uphill, searching all sides of the mountains. Some years Riley gathers huckleberries well into September.

Some of the best picking, Riley says, is “where there's heavy brush and it's terribly steep.” Here he often has to do what he calls “one-handed picking.” That's where the

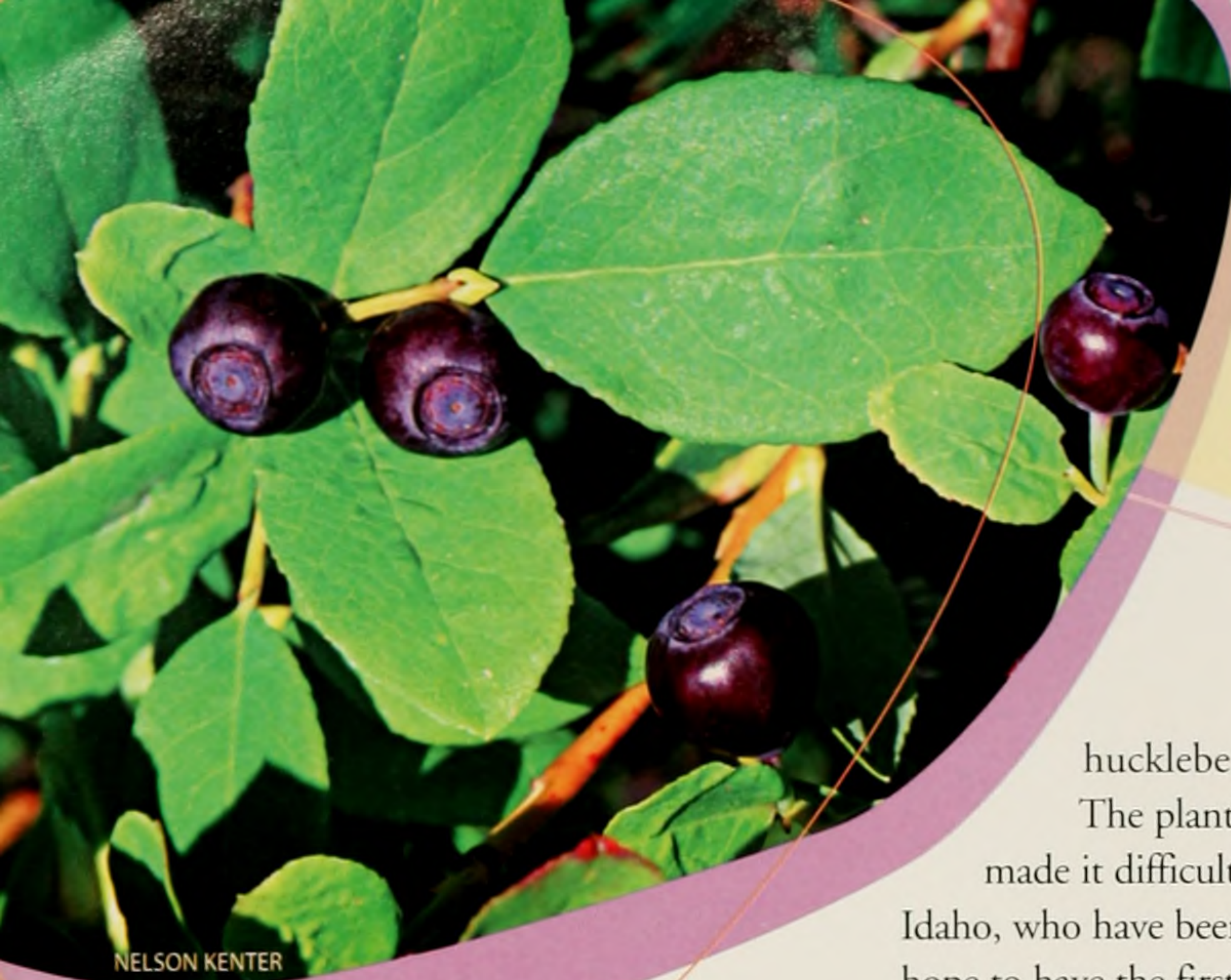


HUCKS BY THE HANDFUL The best picking in Montana is in the northwest, around the Flathead and Kootenai national forests. Look for mixed forests of lodgepole pine, larch, spruce, and subalpine fir. Then search spots that get lots of sun, such as ski slopes and old clear-cuts.

PHIL FARNES

HOWLDOGS





NELSON KENTER



PURPLE REIGN Though a close cousin to the blueberry, the huckleberry (left) is far more delectable, say Montana berries. Among those heading to the huckleberry hills in late summer are grizzly and black bears (below left), which gorge on the succulent fruit to build fat for winter hibernation. No less voracious are huckleberry fans who flock to festivals (right) in Trout Lake, Whitefish, and Seeley Lake each summer, where vendors sell everything from huckleberry ice cream to huckleberry barbecue sauce.

picker has to hang on to the huckleberry bush to prevent tumbling downhill while picking the berries.

Riley says when the berries are abundant and large ($\frac{3}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in diameter), he can collect a gallon in about an hour. When it's poor picking and berries are small, however, a single quart per hour may be as good as it gets.

Huckleberries are delicate plants that require adequate sunlight and warmth to fruit abundantly. Depending on elevation and species, huckleberries begin blooming any time between May and July. The small flowers, shaped like Chinese lanterns, vary in color from whitish green to pinkish red. Bees and other insects that pollinate the short-lived blossoms don't have enough time to get the job done during a cool, cloudy spring. These are the years of low

huckleberry production.

The plant's finicky nature has made it difficult to tame. Researchers in Idaho, who have been trying for years, now hope to have the first commercial huckleberry plants available in about 2010.

That thought horrifies Ellen Bryson, a huckleberry enthusiast from Helena who can't imagine eating a farm-raised huck. "Nothing will ever replace a wild huckleberry," she insists.

The picking

A few things to know before heading out to harvest huckleberries: One, you don't need a permit to pick hucks in the Flathead National Forest unless you exceed the limit of 10 gallons per person. Other national forests have their own limits, so check first with the particular forest where you plan to pick. Those who sell berries or collect more than their personal limit are considered commercial pickers and must purchase a permit (\$4 per day or \$80 per season). Considering that huckleberries sell for \$30 to \$45 per gallon, most commercial pickers can pay for their permit in no time.

Another thing to remember is that people aren't the only creatures working huckleberry patches. Black bears and grizzlies eat them too, so whenever you're picking in bear country, stay alert and make plenty of noise to reduce the chances of surprising a nearby bear.

Once you start picking, you'll notice that huckleberries come in a variety of sizes and colors. Stickney found three color phases to the globe huckleberries: dark

red, blue-black or purple-black, and blue-black with a whitish "bloom" or coating similar to that found on plums.

The most likely purple fruit to fool a neophyte berry picker is the serviceberry. Also known as shadeberry and Juneberry, its leaves are rounded and toothed (serrated), and the seeds are large. Serviceberries are edible, but they aren't as scrumptious as hucks.

For many people, picking huckleberries is a tradition as important as Thanksgiving or the elk opener. Bryson heads west to stock up on hucks every summer during the third week of July. "I'm out to get a couple gallons for myself and make desserts and jam to give away," she says.

Her ritual includes baking a pie or crisp to share with friends after returning home from the season's first collecting spree. "We absolutely savor that first huckleberry pie," she says. "It just doesn't get any better than that. I absolutely love it and love to get other people going on it, too."

Bryson finds huckleberries by driving into the mountains with the car windows rolled down. Sometimes she sees the purple globes hanging from bushes. Other times she actually smells the hucks first, pulling over to follow her nose into the hills.

To hold picked berries, Bryson uses a plastic container, tightly lidded. "There's nothing worse than watching berries rolling down the slopes," she says, explaining that pickers can expect to stumble a few times while traversing the rugged terrain where huckleberries grow. Bryson wears her quart-sized huckleberry bucket at waist level on a soft rope necklace like an oversized pendant. A U-shaped flap cut in the lid allows her to place berries in the container without removing the top. The flap readily pops back into position to keep berries corralled while both hands remain free for picking.

Though some hard-core hunters remove



CYNTHIA A. DELANEY

Ellen Horowitz is a freelance writer in Columbia Falls.

berries from the plant with wooden paddles or rakes, Bryson shuns that technique because too many leaves fall into the bucket.

“Besides, there’s nothing better than sitting in a good patch of berries and picking them by hand,” she says.

Sherry Johns of Kalispell grew up huckleberrying with her parents and has passed what she calls a “family passion” down to her own children. She ignores rumors of good or bad berry years, preferring to hike out to favorite spots to see for herself how the hucks are doing. On weekly treks with friends, Johns carries a 1-cup container in her daypack. If she finds huckleberries, she can bring enough home to make a batch of muffins or pancakes. If the berries are abundant, she’ll return later with a 4-quart plastic ice cream bucket for some serious collecting.

“My mother used to fix huckleberry syrup and jam, but I’ve never done that because it takes too many berries,” says

PHOTOS BY DEA VOGEL



Johns. “Having berries in the freezer is like having money in the bank. You don’t want to spend it all.” Her goal is to harvest a few gallons each summer, enough for pancakes, pies, and muffins to last the year.

Though books, guides, and articles can provide basic tips on when and where to find hucks, nothing beats experience. You have to get out there and start searching. The more time you spend afield, the better you get at finding huckleberries.

And that means looking on foot. Bryson

tells beginners to stop the car once in a while, get out, and look around. “Many berries hide under leaves, so you can’t see them from the road,” she says. “Once you learn to recognize a huckleberry bush, you’ll start to see berries.”

She also encourages beginners to keep at it, because the payoff is worth the wait. “There’s nothing better than finding that very first patch,” she says. “It’s heaven. You’ll think you’ve struck gold.” 🐻

After the Picking By Ellen Bryson

Most commercially sold hucks have been cleaned by the vendor, but if you pick them yourself, you’ll want to clean them. I put a few cups in a strainer and pick the sticks, leaves, and bugs out by hand. I don’t rinse the berries because I can’t bear to see the precious juice wash down the drain.

What do you do with the cleaned huckleberries (provided you haven’t eaten them all at one sitting)? One option is to freeze

them for later use. Hucks must be frozen tightly in a sealed container so the fragrance doesn’t permeate everything in your freezer. One way is to freeze the berries in a single layer on a paper towel-covered cookie sheet and then put the frozen berries into a container. Another is to dab the berries gently with a paper towel to remove moisture, put them in a large glass jar or heavy-duty zipper-lock

plastic bag, and then freeze. They freeze well this way and are easy to remove later a cup or two at a time.

Try to freeze hucks within a few days of picking. Otherwise they get too juicy, begin to ferment, and freeze into one big huckleberry clump.

I don’t wait to thaw huckleberries when baking but simply add them frozen to a pie, cobbler, or pancake recipe. This is one of my favorite recipes, given to me by my picking buddy, Desi Hanson.



HUCKLEBERRY COBBLER

- 1 box butter recipe yellow cake mix
- ¾ c. butter
- 1 c. finely ground pecans
- 1 c. quick-cooking oatmeal
- 1 T. cinnamon
- 1½ c. fresh or frozen huckleberries

Preheat oven to 350°. Mix first five ingredients until crumbly. Put half the mixture in the bottom of a 13- by 9-inch baking pan (sprayed with cooking oil) and pat down. Distribute huckleberries over bottom layer. Sprinkle remaining crumb mixture over the top and pat lightly. Bake 30 minutes or until lightly browned. Serve with whipped cream or ice cream.