



IT'S *Berry-Pickin'* TIME

Juicy **FRUIT**

BY PEGGY HEINKEL-WOLFE • PHOTOGRAPHS BY COURTNEY PERRY



THEIR FINGERTIPS give them away: Stained purple. Or blue. Or red.

Hard-core berry-pickers like Debbie Westerland, of Arlington, begin migrating to their favorite berry patch about this time of year, for the pure pleasure of picking their own fruit. Debbie doesn't have to go far—her home is only a few miles from Gnismar Farms—so she goes as often as she can with her teenager and two preschoolers when strawberries are in season.

"We just have fun," she says.

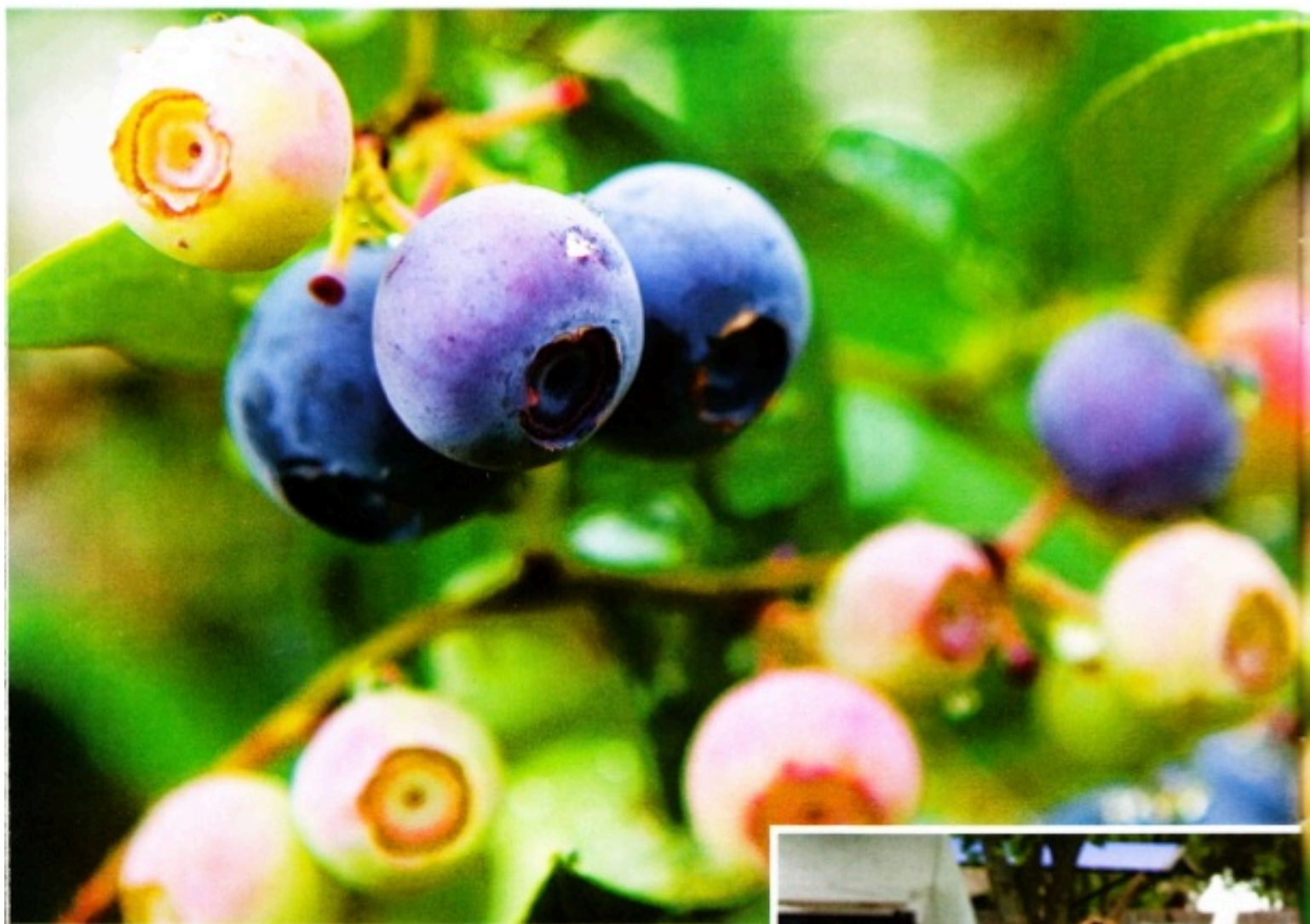
Pick-your-own berry patches are scattered across the state, with concentrations in East, South, and North Central Texas. And happily, picking is fun regardless of age or ability. A toddler beams with pride when showing off a half-pint of straw-

berries she picked all by herself. A grandfather finds he can pick over the head of his young grandson at the same blueberry bush. A pair of teenage boys invariably tries to best each other for the most blackberries picked in an hour, once convinced of the "cool" factor.

BLUEBERRIES offer the friendliest picking experience, according to Jack Martin of Martin's Berry Patch near Hallsville. He has seen parents take their babies out in strollers as they pick, only to see the babies come back with blue juice running down their bibs.

"You gotta start 'em young in eating right," says Jack, referring to berries' healthful reputation. All berries contain beneficial vitamins and minerals, and blueberries are famously rich in cancer-fighting antioxidants.

[FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP] Pick-your-own farms across Texas offer sweet, succulent berries. Martin's Berry Patch, near Hallsville, offers blackberries, red raspberries, and blueberries, while Gnismar Farms in Arlington offers blackberries and strawberries. Gnismar's customers can also buy "strawberry plant bags" if they want to grow their own strawberries. Veteran berry-pickers consider stained fingertips a badge of honor.



[CLOCKWISE FROM TOP] Blueberries grow in clusters, but not all the berries ripen at the same time. Even the dark blue ones may not be fully ripe; it's best to pluck them when they have lost their luster and fall easily from the plant. Sherri Maines and her son Jonathan of Denton enjoy picking strawberries at Gnismar Farms. People aren't the only creatures who like to go berry-picking. Here, Jack Martin's dog, Girl, awaits a ride from the fields.



**DON'T BE SHY
ABOUT PICKING MORE
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RIGHT AWAY. FREEZE
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TO ENJOY ON
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MANY OF Jack's regular blueberry customers—not just the old-timers—bring a chair, sit down on the shady side of a well-established bush (which can reach eight feet tall), and fill a half-bushel basket in no time. In fact, one of his steadfast helpers, 16-year-old Will McGinness, of Hallsville, found that he fills baskets faster when he finds a good area and stays there until he picks it clean, rather than flitting from spot to spot.

In contrast to bountiful blueberry bushes, raspberries and blackberries grow on upright canes. While there's usually not enough yield in any one spot to make picking from a chair practical, these bushes grow about waist-high or higher, so they don't require the kind of bending or stooping needed for strawberries. Gnismer Farms plants strawberries in raised beds, at the perfect height for most kids.

BERRIES NOW AND LATER

Although she has a small thornless blackberry patch, and innumerable dewberries surround her home in Argyle, Peggy Heinkel-Wolfe drives to various pick-your-own farms to pick berries several times each year. She prefers pick-your-own farms that offer organically-grown berries so that she doesn't have to worry about pesticides and other chemicals. Although some berry-pickers gather extra fruit to make jams and jellies, Peggy usually freezes her bounty (most berries keep up to a year in a freezer held at 0° F). She offers the following pointers for pickin' and preservin'.

STRAWBERRIES

Pick strawberries when they are red throughout but still firm and shiny. Keep them cool on the trip home. Strawberries that have been capped (had the foliage removed) and washed will keep in the refrigerator for a day or two. To freeze strawberries, cap, rinse, and dry them thoroughly, arrange them in a single layer on a cookie sheet, and place the cookie sheet in the freezer. Once the strawberries are hard (about 1½ hours), pack them loosely in a resealable plastic bag, and return them to the freezer. To thaw, pull what you need from the bag, and rinse to defrost.



BLACKBERRIES (AND DEWBERRIES)

Pick blackberries when they are black and shiny throughout and pull easily from the vine. Those that need more than a nudge will be green in the center and won't ripen further off the vine. Look for bigger berries, which will have pulled in more water and, thus, are sweeter. Keep them cool, and transport them in a single layer, as they lose juice when they



are stacked. Stored the same way, blackberries will keep one to two days in the refrigerator. Freeze in a single layer on a cookie sheet, as with strawberries, but do so without rinsing, as this hastens their demise. Pack them loosely in a resealable plastic bag, and return them to the freezer. To thaw, pull what you need from the bag, and rinse to defrost.

RASPBERRIES

Pick raspberries when they are a deep, dark red and pull easily from the vine. Transport, refrigerate, and freeze as you would blackberries. To thaw, pull what you need from the bag, and rinse to defrost.

BLUEBERRIES

The biggest blueberries are usually the sweetest; pick them when they are dark blue and have lost their luster. Keep them cool on the trip home. They can be stored several days in the refrigerator. Freeze as you would blackberries (don't rinse them beforehand). To thaw, pull what you need from the bag, and rinse to defrost.

NOTE: Although Peggy is comfortable not rinsing organically-grown blackberries, raspberries, and blueberries before freezing them, commercial horticultural extension agent Dotty Woodson in Tarrant County recommends rinsing all berries beforehand. ("Just rinse the more fragile berries lightly, and handle them as little as possible," she says.) When freezing strawberries and raspberries, Dotty also recommends using Fruit-Fresh or another ascorbic-acid product to prevent darkening.

Still, adults with a little stamina can go a long way down a strawberry row.

A century ago, and up until World War II, strawberries were a major Texas crop. Their significance decreased as cotton and other crops became more profitable. Pasadena and Poteet still hold festivals in the red berry's honor, letting

some out-of-state berries share the spotlight with those Texas-grown. Today, strawberries are produced on small farms all over the state.

Many of these growers are taking advantage of the pick-your-own trend, which reduces the labor needed and capitalizes on the plant's ability to bear quick-

ly in early spring. Botanist Lynn Remsing of Gnismar Farms may be the cleverest of all, having figured out how to shoe-horn a second season of holiday berries, during November and December, on his Arlington farm.

Rural Texans have long braved the thorns on ground-running brambles to get at dewberries, the blackberry's native cousin, so it's no surprise that cultivated blackberries can be found across the state, too. Growers in Texas' northern regions get enough cold weather to meet the chilling needs of popular, thornless varieties, but growers in warmer areas,



J. GRIFFIN SMITH, FOOD STYLING BY MIN PICK

FRESH BERRY PIE

Pick an extra quart of berries to make this sumptuous pie. It's extra simple since it doesn't have a top crust and extra showy since the berries aren't cooked in the sauce. (Note that you'll have a half-package of gelatin left over, which you can save for making another pie.) Follow the variations at the end of the recipe to make a strawberry, blackberry, raspberry, or blueberry pie.

- 1 c. sugar
- 3 T. cornstarch
- 3 T. corn syrup
- 1/8 tsp. salt
- 1 c. water
- 1 partial 3-oz. pkg. of flavored gelatin (see variations at right)
- lemon juice (see variation for blueberry pie)
- 1 qt. berries, rinsed and drained well
- 1 baked (9-in.) pastry shell, cooled
- sweetened whipped cream or crème fraîche (optional)

Combine sugar, cornstarch, corn syrup, salt, and water in a small saucepan. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly. Remove from heat when mixture becomes clear. Stir in flavored gelatin and lemon juice, according to variations given below; set aside, and allow sauce to cool to room temperature.

Arrange berries in baked pastry shell. Pour cooled sauce over berries, and chill pie until set (about 2 hours). If desired, top with whipped cream or crème fraîche before serving.

Variations:

For a **strawberry** or **blackberry** (or **dewberry**) pie, add 3 T. of strawberry-flavored or blackberry-flavored gelatin, respectively.

For a **raspberry** pie, decrease sugar to 3/4 c. and add 3 T. of raspberry-flavored gelatin.

For a **blueberry** pie, decrease sugar to 3/4 c. and add 3 T. of lemon-flavored gelatin and 2 T. of lemon juice.

Note: This recipe also works well for a fresh peach pie, using 1 qt. sliced peaches, 3 T. of peach gelatin, and 1-2 T. of lemon juice.

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such as Rick Matt of Matt Family Orchards outside Houston, mix some thorny varieties with thornless for more-reliable yields. Rick says he trellises his blackberries and prunes them into the shape of a 4x4 hedge for easier picking.

Blueberries, however, are limited to the acid-blessed soils of East Texas. That's about the only place you'll find finicky raspberries, too, primarily because of their intolerance of heat. Jack Martin claims he's the only one around making a go of "Yankee raspberries," as he calls the two red-raspberry varieties he grows, Nova and Reveille.

"I've got growing them just about figured out. The taste is superior," says Jack. He pulled his regular raspberry (Dorman

BUCKETS OF BERRIES

THE TEXAS Department of Agriculture maintains a statewide directory of pick-your-own farms (berries, as well as other produce) on its Pick Texas Web site, www.picktexas.com. Contact information for the growers mentioned in the story follows. Be sure to call ahead to find out about hours and fruit available before making a trip.



No matter which farm you visit, follow the grower's instructions for navigating between the rows, how and where to pick, and other orchard etiquette. You'll be more comfortable if you pick early in the morning and wear light cotton clothing, sturdy shoes, a wide-brimmed hat, sunscreen, and sunglasses.

Gnismar Farms (strawberries and blackberries) is at 3010 S. Bowen Rd. in Arlington. From I-20, exit on Bowen Rd., and go north $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles. Look for the orchard's sign on the left side of the road. Call 817/469-8704; www.gnismar.com.

Matt Family Orchard (blackberries) is at 21110 Bauer Hockley Rd. near Tomball (about 30 miles northwest of Houston). From Tomball, at the intersection of Texas 249 and FM 2920, go west on FM 2920 for about $6\frac{1}{2}$ miles, go south (left) on Mueschke Rd. for about 4 miles to Bauer Hockley Rd., where you'll see the orchard's sign. Turn west (right), and drive 1 mile (through the green-pipe gate) to the green barn. Call 281/351-7676 or 281/467-9758; www.mattfamilyorchard.com.

Martin's Berry Patch (blackberries, blueberries, and red raspberries) is at 4534 FM 968 near Hallsville. From Hallsville, go east on US 80 about 4 miles, go south (right) on FM 3102 for 2 miles, and go east (left) on FM 968 for $\frac{1}{2}$ mile. The entrance is on the left. From I-20, take exit 610 and go north on FM 3251 for $1\frac{3}{4}$ miles, then go west (left) on FM 968 for 2 miles. The entrance is on the right. Call 903/660-3283.

King's Orchard (blackberries, blueberries, and strawberries) is at 11282 CR 302 near Plantersville. From Plantersville, go north on FM 1774 for 6 miles, turn right at the orchard's sign (just before the gas station) onto CR 302, and go $\frac{3}{4}$ mile to the entrance on the left. Call 936/894-2766; www.kingsorchard.com.



Blake Richey (left) and Tim Green pick blackberries at Martin's Berry Patch while on an outing with other members of Hallsville's Cub Scout Pack 302.

Red) canes two years ago for the experiment, which is proving successful. Although many tall, East Texas conifers and deciduous trees surround this berry patch, Jack has built a sturdy system of shade cloth to protect the plants from the summer sun.

IF YOU'RE READY to pick, but aren't sure where to start, try searching first on the Pick Texas Web site, www.picktexas.com, a directory of growers maintained by the Texas Department of Agriculture. Part of the department's "Go Texan" marketing program, the site lists both roadside stands, where the produce is already picked, and pick-your-own farms. A color-coded map can help you find farms close to home, and then you can search by county or type of berry. Many farms, like Matt's and Gnismar's, are in the thick of urban areas and cater to those new to the experience. Others, like the venerable King's Orchard in Plantersville or the Mar-

tin's patch, are near major travel routes. If you enjoy driving a backroad or two, the escape from the big-city hustle to visit an out-of-the-way farm makes the trip doubly worthwhile.

Pick Texas includes links to some (but not all) growers' Web sites, which provide good information about when to expect fruit to be available (but call or e-mail ahead to be sure, especially if the Web site isn't specific). Strawberries appear first, usually in mid-to late spring. Blackberries and raspberries come along in June, and blueberries in late June and early July. Conditions can vary regionally and from year to year.

Many growers keep in

touch with their local agricultural extension office, so calling the county office in the area you plan to visit may yield the names of a few other growers. Once you've scoped out your own favorites, ask the growers if they keep a mailing list. Many send out an e-mail or postcard a few weeks before the season starts.

Don't be shy about pick-

ing more than you can eat right away. Freeze a quart or two to enjoy on a winter day. If you do, happy memories will rush back every time you pry open a bag, your nose rewarded with the scent of summer captured at its peak. ★

Argyle author and veteran berry-picker PEGGY HEINKEL-WOLFE says her fingertips usually resume their normal color by fall.

Dallas photographer COURTNEY PERRY wrote and photographed the story on Quanah in our April issue.



Lynn Remsing of Gnismar Farms oversees strawberry pickers.