

# Huckleberry Quick Facts

## Indigenous Use

Much of the Plateau culture region's indigenous people's activities were centered around food gathering. This was described as the seasonal round. Within the cycle of the seasonal round, the people moved to various locations within their culture region seeking food which was in season at the time. Common seasonal relocation areas would include places for root digging, near the river for fishing, or in the mountains for berry, plant gathering and hunting.

Deer, salmon and other fish varieties, game animals, roots, berries and other plants were gathered by the people. There were more than 100 varieties of roots, berries and other plants that were available for gathering.

Many tribes historically held a berry ceremony to honor and welcome the new harvest season. Huckleberry gathering also served as a significant social gathering, staying together in the mountains for significant periods of time and engaging in other playful pastimes while there.

In the past, various tribes would also practice controlled burn-overs of the lands to improve the habitat for various wild berries.

Mountain huckleberries were an important food source and are still picked today. Originally they were typically eaten fresh with meat, or partially dried, crushed and formed into cakes. Berries were also fully dried. Today they are commonly eaten fresh, canned or in contemporary customized recipes, while many of the traditional forms of gathering are still practiced.

## Key Characteristics

In the Northwest region of the states, there are more than 12 species of huckleberries which range from the coastal area to the high mountain areas. The more commonly known varieties are the Red Huckleberry, Evergreen Huckleberry and Big Huckleberry.

In the Plateau Region, the variety gathered tends to be the Big Huckleberry, also known as the Mountain Huckleberry.

Big Huckleberry is a deciduous shrub, typically two to four feet tall, oval shaped, greenish-yellow leaves that taper to a pointed tip. Their urn-shaped blossoms are round and pinkish white. The eventual fruit berry is shiny, about ¼ inch around and very dark and purple.

### Facts About

- The scientific name for the Big Huckleberry is *Vaccinium membranaceum*
- Big Huckleberries are found in the mountain areas, at higher elevations. This variety east of the cascade mountains in Eastern WA becomes ripe in late summer.
- Huckleberries are among the healthiest of berries, they do not raise blood sugar, are high in antioxidants, they are excellent for heart health, they contain arbutin which also helps to fight against various minor bacterial infections.
- Many tribes historically held a berry ceremony to honor and welcome the new harvest season.
- Many families today will gather the berries with enough to store for future use by canning or freezing them.

### Helpful Gathering Tips

- Be sure to be with someone who knows how to properly identify the berries to pick, or learn how to properly identify them
- Be aware that there are some berries and plants that grow in the wild that are not for human consumption and can be poisonous
- Harvest from safe areas, avoid roadsides, industrial areas or places that may have been sprayed with pesticides or herbicides. You don't want to eat berries that have absorbed toxins which can be passed to you
- Make sure you have permission to be on the land area
- Respect the plants for their gift, some people offer a prayer or song to honor the plant
- Leave enough berries behind when you pick, other animals rely on the berries for food. Also leave enough for them to be replenished

## Contemporary Recipes

Many families still maintain the simple tradition of blessing the new harvest season, gathering together to pick berries, to honor the plant and the land, to not over-harvest and to complete the preparation of their harvest. But in our modern societies, many of the recipes used to incorporate Huckleberries into our lives have evolved into a whole range of complex and simple varieties. Everything from huckleberry marinades to fruit leather or Huckleberry pie.

## Indigenous Storytelling

Many of the Indigenous stories serve to teach about geographical connections to the land. In doing this they often use characters called the animal-people (the animals) and often plants as well. Some stories also teach about how certain plants came to be in specific areas, or how they became known for certain use. Two examples of stories from Washington State tribes are, *Mountain Goat and Huckleberry*, a story from the *Upper Columbia River Book of Legends*, and *The Huckleberry Medicine*, a Coastal Salish story provided by the WA State Since Time Immemorial Curriculum.

## Information Sources

- Coyote and the Colville Book - Various contributors
- Feeding 7 Generations A Salish Cookbook By Elise Krohn and Valerie Segrest
- Tend, Gather and Grow - Curriculum for wild plants of the PNW
- Ethnobotany of the Okanogan-Colville Indians of British Columbia and Washington
- Plant Teachings for Growing Social-Emotional Skills by GRuB and Northwest Indian Treatment Center