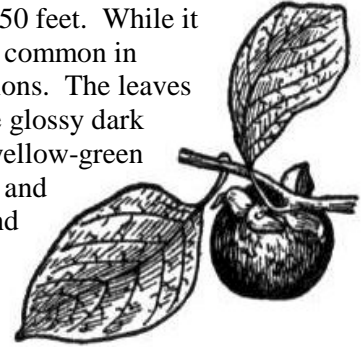


Fruit of Little Labor

When you think of fruit in Florida, usually the first thing that comes to mind is oranges. They are not native to the state and require quite a bit of work and pesticides. What many people do not realize is that Florida is home to a variety of native fruit.

Persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*) is a deciduous tree that can reach a height of 50 feet. While it is usually found in many habitats throughout the state it prefers sandy soils. It is common in sandhills, scrubs, old fields and roadsides and will adapt to many adverse conditions. The leaves are oval with pointed ends, alternate and are 2 1/2 to 5 1/2 inches long. They are glossy dark green on the top with pale green undersides and provide good fall color turning yellow-green and reddish-purple. The greenish-white flowers are fragrant and dioecious (male and female flowers on separate trees). On male trees the flowers are 1/3 inch long and in clusters. On female trees they are solitary and are 1/2 inch long. The round, edible fruit is yellow-orange and about 1 1/2 inch in diameter. When ripe (usually in October) the sweet fruit will fall from the tree when it is shaken.



They are often eaten raw (only when fully ripe) and are used in wines, puddings, cakes, pies and other baked goods. The fruit also attracts white tailed deer, raccoons, opossums, and songbirds, which help distribute the seeds. The persimmon propagates easily from seed and will tolerate drought and flooding. Young trees are fast growing but the growth rate slows to moderate when the tree reaches fruit bearing age.

American plum (*Prunus americana*) is a small deciduous tree growing to a height of 20 feet. The leaves are alternate, oval, pointed and two to four inches long. The fragrant white flowers are 1/3 inch and are formed in clusters of two to five in early spring. The orange to red fruit is one inch long and elongated. The fruit is used in jelly, jam and pies. It is found growing in old fields and edges of woodlands.

Chickasaw plum (*Prunus angustifolia*) is a deciduous tree reaching a height of 20 feet. The glossy green leaves are lance shaped and have a pronounced tip. Small clusters of white, 1/2 inch, fragrant flowers appear in spring. The elongated fruit is yellow to red and is edible. It is native to north and central Florida in open fields, along edges of woods and roadsides.

Scrub plum (*Prunus geniculata*) is a deciduous shrub up to five feet tall. It is native to north and central Florida in sandhills and pine scrubs. The oval leaves are 1/2 inch long and have finely serrated edges. The solitary flowers are white, 1/3 inch, and appear in winter. The reddish plums are one inch long. This plum is listed as an endangered species. Much of its native habitat has been destroyed by development. It can be found in some native nurseries.

Highbush blackberry (*Rubus argutus*) is common in north and central Florida in wet woodlands, near standing water and stream banks. It has tall, thorny, arching stems. The leaves are alternate, palmately compound with mostly five leaflets, and sharply toothed margins. The blooms appear from March to April and are white to pink, one inch in diameter, and are found in loose clusters. It produces a juicy, clustered, black colored berry.

Sand blackberry (*Rubus cuneifolius*) is a perennial shrub with prickly arching stems and averages three feet in height. The leaves are alternate, compound with three to five leaflets, toothed and dark green on top and white or grayish underneath. The blooms appear from March until May and are white to pinkish-white, one inch across, and have five distinct petals. The edible fruit is a cluster of black globular drupelets. As the name implies it prefers sandy soils. It is found in sandhills, upland mixed forests, sandy thickets and pine flatwoods.

Dewberry (*Rubus trivialis*) is a prostrate, vinelike shrub. The leaves are alternate, compound with mostly five leaflets (occasionally three), with margins coarsely and doubly toothed. The blooms appear from February to April and are white, pink or rose colored, reach one inch in diameter, and are typically solitary. The fruit is edible, juicy and black when ripe. It is located throughout the state in pine flatwoods, thickets and roadsides.

Sparkleberry (*Vaccinium arboreum*) is a large deciduous shrub or small tree. It grows in full sun or partial shade up to 27 feet, but is usually smaller. The twisted trunk has flaking reddish brown bark. Its leaves are alternate, round to oval and up to two inches long. Appearing in spring are small flowers that are fragrant, white and urn-shaped. Black, shiny, edible berries form in summer. It is found growing in north and central Florida in upland mixed forests, oak scrubs, dunes, sandhills and coastal hammocks. Commonly used in jellies and jams, it is also food for bears, opossums, raccoons and songbirds.

Highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) is a large deciduous shrub or small tree up to nine feet tall. The leaves are alternate, oval and finely toothed. In late winter and spring, white urn-shaped flowers form in clusters. The edible berries range in color from shiny blue, dull blue to black. It is found in north and central Florida in pinelands, upland woods and swamps.

Darrow's blueberry (*Vaccinium darrowii*) is an evergreen shrub about three feet tall. It grows in full sun or partial shade and likes acidic soil. The oval, alternate leaves are about 1/2 inch long and are a light blue-green, turning yellow and red in fall. White to pinkish-white urn-shaped flowers form in late winter and early spring. The berries are edible and are blue when ripe. It is commonly found in north and central Florida in scrubs, sandhills, flatwoods and pinelands.



Shiny blueberry (*Vaccinium myrsinites*) is a low growing evergreen shrub up to two feet tall. The oval leaves are alternate, glossy green and are no more than 3/4 inch long. Appearing in late winter and spring are small urn-shaped flowers that are pinkish white. The edible berries are blue-black when ripe. This blueberry is often found with *V. darrowii* in north and central Florida in scrubs, sandhills, sandy pinelands and flatwoods. It prefers dry, sandy soil that is acidic.

Deerberry (*Vaccinium stamineum*) gets its common name because deer forage the leaves, twigs and fruit. It is a large deciduous shrub with multiple stems growing to a height of five feet, sometimes taller. The leaves are alternate, thin and oval. Appearing in late winter and spring are clusters of small white, cup-like flowers. The stamens of the flowers extend well beyond the petals. The berries range in color from whitish blue, reddish, purplish-black and dark blue. It is native to north and central Florida in pine flatwoods, sandhills, upland mixed forests and scrubs.

Muscadine grape (*Vitis rotundifolia*) is a fast growing woody vine with unbranched tendrils that are opposite the leaves. It is commonly found throughout Florida in pine flatwoods, dry hammocks and coastal sites. The leaves are alternate, heart-shaped and coarsely toothed. Small greenish flowers are borne in axillary clusters in spring and early summer. The purple-black berries are edible and are often used in wines, jams and juice.

These fruit trees, shrubs and vines attract a variety of songbirds and other wildlife and can be grown in your own yard. There is no need to amend the soil. They will grow in many adverse conditions. There is no need to use pesticides because most do not attract harmful insects. With no extra work you could truly enjoy your yard. Take a stroll, listen to the birds sing and enjoy your fruit as fresh as it can be. That is what nature intended.

By: Cindy Conard

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