

# Lowbush Blueberries: Out of the Barrens and into the Garden

*Ann Crichton-Harris*

**This neglected native has great potential as a landscape groundcover.**

Busloads of fall color-watchers spend countless hours traveling the roads of New England—north into New Hampshire and Vermont, west to the Berkshires, and northeast into the southwestern parts of Maine. These visitors get a wonderful show. The fall blaze of the New England maples is world famous and justly so.

The color, of course, is evanescent. You have to watch the weather and the newspaper reports to catch it as it peaks, and it may be that you miss the best of the show because of a change in the weather. Under the best of conditions, the peak foliage color lasts only a week or two.

There is a less well-known show that is equally brilliant in color but is even better in one respect—it lasts much longer. The rare autumn visitor to downeast Maine cannot fail to be amazed by the show of color of the thousands of acres of open barrens, as the local blueberry fields are called. Washington and Hancock counties are the places to go to see one of the most remarkable color shows anywhere. Starting around the first of September and running through the end of November, or whenever snow starts to fall, most tourists miss a display of astonishing beauty. While much of the color is visible from Route 1, it is better if you strike inland a few miles off the main road. *Vaccinium angustifolium*, the lowbush blueberry that carpets the area, has an exquisite palette. Punctuated by rocks and

by groups of red pine (*Pinus resinosa*) and other native plants, this part of Maine resembles an old French tapestry throughout the year.

## **A Multi-Season Display**

The blueberry is a plant for all seasons. In early spring the leaves range from bright yellow to dark green; in May the flowers may be either white or white tinged with pink. In July the berries are beginning to turn deep blue. In the fall the colors of the leaves run from greens to deep wine red, bright red, orange red, and even a rare bright yellow. The different types have different color sequences. They compete with one another for living space, one patch pushing against another, yet each managing to keep its more or less circular shape. By mid-October the leaves are gone but the dramatic effect continues. Most of the plants have bright red, or even bright green, stems.

Very little attention has been paid to the use of these plants in ornamental horticulture. As a landscape designer in the downeast Maine area, I found this out when my clients asked me to produce a natural-looking landscape, low in maintenance, thriving on our peaty, acid soils, and having the potential to attract wildlife. Meeting all these requirements, lowbush blueberries seemed to be the answer. To my surprise, I found that local nurseries seldom, if ever, sell the lowbush blueberry, and

when they do, it is inevitably a variety selected for its fruit production rather than its ornamental characteristics. The wild blueberries are an important cash crop in the area, the bulk of the crop being processed for the commercial food industry. Most people who have tasted lowbush blueberries consider their flavor superior to the larger fruit of the highbush blueberry, *V. corymbosum*, generally the only fresh blueberry sold in grocery stores.

The lowbush blueberry is called "wild" by virtue of its heterogeneous genetic background. If you wanted to design a field that would copy nature, and if you wanted to do it without waiting twenty years for the effect to take shape, it would be almost impossible. Although different clones (as the mother plant and her rhizomatous progeny are called) often have very different properties, you cannot at this time purchase fifty plants with, say, a deep red fall color that will retain their leaves a long time, and another hundred in bright yellow, and so on. Those that you see in the fields have been there for a long time, often hundreds of years, and if you dig a few here and there from the side of the road and plant them in your own garden, you will inevitably end up with a tweedy effect. If you had in mind drifts of color, rather like bulbs planted for naturalization, then you have to be able to buy quantities of plants that have specified characteristics. It should be possible to design an "earth tapestry" that will imitate nature, and possibly improve on it, showing broad brush strokes of color as from a Jacobean palette.

### Blueberries Are Low-Maintenance

As landscape plants, lowbush blueberries initially take some work, primarily weeding and attention to soil pH and texture, but as time goes on, they can definitely be classified as low-maintenance for landscape purposes. Once established, they need to be burned or mowed closely every second or third year. This results in more vigorous spreading and a much better harvest in the intervening years. The severe pruning also has the effect of keep-



Close-up of the flowers of *Vaccinium angustifolium*.  
Photo by Rácz and Debreczy.

ing the plants lower and more manageable, and helps in controlling disease and weeds.

In the wild, blueberries grow happily in full sun and in nutrient-poor, sandy soil. This means that if you plant them in rich garden soil the weeds will benefit more than the blueberries. In general, blueberries are remarkably stress tolerant, but too much stress, such as lack of water or even a truck backing over the plants, will result in premature color change in the fall.

If a harvest of berries is desired, it is better to plant a number of different clones for increased cross-pollination. The fruit is ready to be picked towards the end of July and will continue to ripen almost until the end of August. By the end of October, the leaves will have dropped, leaving the stems to shine in the sunlight, many of them shimmering green or red against the first snows, rather in the manner of the red osier or the yellow-twig dogwood. I think this effect, when seen in sunlight, is just as dramatic as that of the leaves.

Hardy from U.S.D.A. Zones 7 to 3, lowbush blueberries are well adapted to an acid soil,



The blueberry barrens of Maine. Photo by Tom Gomes, University of Maine.

preferably pH 4.3 to 5.0, with low nutrient content. Although small plots of earth can be adjusted for acidity by incorporating peat, sawdust, pine needles, or bark, larger plantings might better be restricted to the acidic, coarse-textured soils of the northeastern United States and Canada where they flourish naturally. With this in mind, companion plants such as *Rhododendron*, *Comptonia*, *Kalmia angustifolia*, *Juniperus*, both *horizontalis* and *procumbens* 'Nana,' and the heaths and heathers would be good choices for a wild or woody garden. Spacing for the blueberry plants is largely a matter of how long you want to wait. They propagate by subsurface, woody rhizomes and are not rapid growers, so one might start with plants fifteen inches on center for a residential area.

### The Future

For the past two years, I've been collecting information on leaf and stem color, leaf retention, height, and, lastly, fruit yield of ten clones chosen initially for their striking autumnal color. This project began in Septem-

ber, 1987, at the Maine Agricultural Experimental Station in Jonesboro, Maine. My goal was to find clones worth propagating in quantity and eventually to make them available to both commercial horticulturists and home gardeners. I am looking forward to having named varieties with specific characteristics available in the next few years. Thus cottagers and homeowners interested in enjoying the look of the landscape—with just an occasional foray into picking enough berries for a pie or for morning cereal—will be able to realize their ambitions. Although my research has leaned particularly towards the visual aspect, I also harvested and weighed the yield from one square yard of each clone that I tagged. Yield ran from just two ounces to slightly over two pounds! Fortunately some of the highest producers in both quantity and flavor were the same ones that developed the best fall and winter colors.

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