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Native edible plants thrive in shade; are pest-resistant; and, in the case of the shrubs that produced these huckleberries, grow fruit that tastes even-better-than-blueberries good.

LET'S FACE IT: Many homes in Western Washington are short on sunlight. I'm not just talking about rain clouds; I'm talking about mature stands of Western red cedar and Douglas fir, towering above neighborhoods and plunging houses into twilight even on sunny afternoons.

As a rule, tree cover is a great thing. After all, our region's natural ecosystem is a dense coniferous forest that supports thousands of unique plant and animal species. However, if you're a gardener focused on edible plantings, the urban canopy can present quite a challenge.

The vast majority of edible plants, from annual vegetables to fruit trees and culinary herbs, demands full sun exposure. They also demand a space with a relatively neutral soil pH and very little competition from other species. Large conifer trees cast shade, acidify the soil and spread incredibly dense root systems across the landscape.

LOW-LIGHT DELIGHT

Our native evergreen huckleberry brings dynamic color and oodles of fruit to your edible shade garden

As a result, the success of conifers and edibles is typically an inversely proportional relationship. Somebody wins, and somebody loses — that is, until you begin to consider the wonderful world of native plants.

Our native plants are native, after all,

because they've evolved to thrive in exactly the conditions provided by cedars and firs. Northwest native plants thrive in shade, prefer acidic soil, use less water than cultivated species, are more resilient to pest and disease pressure, and provide more suitable habitat for local fauna. And as luck (or Mother Nature) would have it, many native plants are also edible. Quite an elegant solution for the shady backyard!

The list of native edible plants includes dozens of species, from ground covers to large shrubs and trees. Many of these species have a place in the home landscape, but the evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*) deserves a spot at the center of any edible shade garden. This delightful species provides year-round interest and produces one of the most delicious wild fruits (like a blueberry, only *Å* better).

The evergreen huckleberry is a broad-leaved shrub that features shiny, waxy leaves and striking pink and white flowers.

The leaf color can be quite dynamic, as new leaves have a reddish/gold color. The leaves mature to a dark green over time. Look for flowers to emerge in midspring, and for huge amounts of ripe berries to show up in the early fall.

Huckleberries are widely available at local nurseries and are typically sold in one-gallon pots. Due to their slow growth rate, it might be worth paying a premium for larger 2-, 3- or 5-gallon plants, if you can find them. When planted in a sunny spot, an evergreen huckleberry often will top out around 2 or 3 feet in height. However, in full shade (say, for example, in the shadow of a 50-foot Douglas fir), a shrub can grow up to 10 feet tall and 10 feet wide.




STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Huge amounts of ripe berries show up on the evergreen huckleberry in early fall, like these in the Washington Park Arboretum.

Like all fruiting plants, huckleberries will perform best if you prune off their blossoms the first season you transplant them to your yard. Blooming and fruiting take a lot of energy, and freeing the plant of this burden allows it to focus on root and vegetative growth, leading to healthier plants and more robust future harvests.

Huckleberries prefer a soil pH between 4.3 and 5.2, which shouldn't be a problem if they're planted under or near any of your coniferous trees. As with any new perennial, it's best to irrigate for the first few seasons after planting, but once they're established, your huckleberries should require virtually no maintenance.

Even if you don't have a spot for huckleberries in your yard, keep an eye out for them on your summer and fall hikes — they can easily be found along trailsides throughout the region. If you've never noticed these striking shrubs before, you'll marvel at their beauty and comically heavy fruit set. And if you're like me, you'll also wonder why these native beauties aren't already planted in everybody's yard. 

Colin McCrate digs plants. Find him at seattleurbanfarmco.com and on Instagram @seattleurbanfarmco.

1/4 Horizontal
3.8125" x 4.9375"

DEL-TEET FURNITURE

3/8 Horizontal:
4.856" x 4.9375"



All About That Basil

It's best to transplant basil seedlings into the garden once nighttime temperatures are consistently above 50 degrees.

Basil also can be slow-growing and finicky if you try to grow your own seedlings indoors, so I recommend purchasing transplants from a nursery when the weather is warm enough to move it right out into your beds.

It's best to transplant basil seedlings into the garden once nighttime temperatures are consistently above 50 degrees. Unfortunately, many nurseries begin carrying basil a month before the weather is warm enough for them to go outside. If you ever find yourself looking at basil plants in April, take a few deep breaths, and slowly back away from the table. Early planted basil is almost certainly going to fail and need replanting later in the spring.

Unless we're having a particularly warm spring, I usually wait until at least June 1 before planting basil outside. In fact, we scheduled the publication date for this article late enough in the spring that basil season is almost upon us.

So, once the weather warms up and dries out, plant your basil in full sun, and space the transplants about 6 inches apart. Nursery-grown basil transplants often come very crowded. It's not uncommon to find a 4-inch pot with eight or 10 plants growing closely together. Make sure you either snip off the excess seedlings or carefully separate them into indi-

This heat-loving herb hates our winters, but once spring has sprung, it's pretty easy to grow from transplants

LOVE BASIL. I love growing basil, eating basil, looking at basil, thinking about basil and talking about basil. One of the best things about basil is that, while on first blush it might seem like a challenging plant to grow, in reality, it is very easy, prolific and predictable. As long as you go about it the right way.

When you live in the Pacific Northwest, the first thing you need to know about basil is that it hates our climate. For about nine months every year, our weather is the exact antithesis of what basil prefers. Basil hates 40-degree weather, and it hates rain. In fact, any temperature below 50 degrees can result in leaf or stem damage, and the plants often become consumed by gray mold during wet spells.

However, basil absolutely loves our summer weather. It grows quickly enough that, even without a warm spring or extended fall season, it can be very successful in the garden.

Like many heat-loving crops, basil needs a head start when grown in temperate climates. If you try seeding it in your garden once the weather gets warm, it just won't have enough time to grow.



THE SEATTLE TIMES FILE

Proof that Colin McCrate has been a basil fan for a while: Here, with his Seattle Urban Farming Company, he plants some in a vegetable garden near Green Lake in 2007.

vidual plants when moving them into the garden.

Prepare the soil as you would for annual vegetable crops, making sure it is loosened and amended with a balanced organic fertilizer. Six or eight basil plants would be a large planting for a typical home garden. If you aren't planning to make lots of pesto, you probably will be happy with two to four plants. If you are a serious basil fanatic, you might consider succession planting, with the first crop transplanted out in early June and a second crop transplanted out three or four weeks later.

One of the great things about basil is that, the more often you harvest it, the more it will produce during the season. Each time you pinch back the stems on your basil, it will branch out, effectively giving you two branches where you previously had one. So the more often you pinch the plant back (and harvest the leaves), the more new, leafing branches you will get. If you can keep up with your basil's growth, you will end up with stout, bushy plants that demand to be made into near-daily servings of pesto and caprese salad.

To harvest basil, simply use your fingers or a pair of scissors, and cut back the top part of any stem that is becoming elongated. You can start to pinch your basil once the plant is 6 inches tall. When harvesting, trim each branch back to the next set of leaves. If any branches seem excessively long, you can pinch back two or even three sets of leaves.

To keep up with a healthy basil plant, you might need to harvest once or twice a week once the plant is established. If the plant begins to flower, redouble your efforts to keep the plant trimmed back. If flower stalks are allowed to develop, new sets of leaves will be much smaller and bitter-tasting. If you get way behind on harvesting, or your plants just seem prone to flowering, you can try cutting the plants back to the lowest set of leaves and letting them regrow from the base up.

Basil doesn't have to stop with Italian varieties, although common types like Genovese are popular for a reason. If you want to explore a bit this season, add some Thai, lime, lemon or cinnamon basil to the garden, and then head out to the potting shed to sharpen up your harvest scissors. 📷

Colin McCrate digs plants. Find him at seattleurbanfarmco.com and on Instagram @seattleurbanfarmco.

1/2 Horizontal:
7.75" x 4.9375"

ROCHE BOBOIS