

# GARDEN HUCKLEBERRY

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Garden huckleberry (*Solanum melanocerasum*, syn *S. nigrum guineense*) is not related to true huckleberries, woody plants in the heath family. Instead, it is an herbaceous annual in the nightshade family, related to tomato, tobacco, eggplant and potato. An unusual crop for gardeners to try, garden huckleberry bears small jet-black berries that are cooked and sweetened, and often combined with other fruits such as apples, lemons and grapes, to make jellies, preserves and pies.

A garden huckleberry hybrid, wonderberry (*Solanum burbankii*) is very similar. Its culture and uses are the same as those of garden huckleberry.

Culture of garden huckleberry is similar to tomato culture: start plants indoors in early April, covering the seeds with ¼ inch of soil. Germination should take one to two weeks. Transplant to a sunny location outdoors when all danger of frost is past and the weather has settled, in late May or early June. Allow two feet between plants.

Garden huckleberry plants resemble pepper plants, bushy and erect, up to two feet tall. Flowers, appearing in clusters in July, are small and white. Each plant will bear hundreds of ½-¾-inch berries, ripening from green to deep black. One plant should produce enough berries for a single pie.

The fruits are not edible until fully ripe and cooked. They are somewhat toxic if eaten unripe, and the raw fruit is quite bitter. The berries are ready to harvest about two weeks after they first turn black, when their skin has changed from shiny to dull, and the flesh is very soft. The

interior pulp will turn from greenish to purple when ripe. The flavor of the berries is improved by allowing them to remain on the plant until after the first frost. The plants have some cold tolerance and fruit may continue to ripen after light frosts.

Many on-line and mail-order seed companies now carry garden huckleberry seeds. Gardeners should buy fresh seed each year or save their own seed, never growing look-alike plants that volunteer in the garden or home landscape. Deadly nightshade (*Solanum dulcamara*) grows in some parts of Minnesota and looks similar to garden huckleberry. It is considered extremely toxic, hence its common name.

*Reviewed by Cindy Tong, Extension Post-Harvest Horticulturist, Univ. of Minn. Extension, 1-08 and Vince Fritz, Extension Horticulturist – Vegetables, Univ. of Minn. Extension 1-08*

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