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Fruits of summer – May 2016

‘Locally grown’ and ‘fresh from the garden’ are hot commodities nationwide. Everyone is getting into the act of either growing their own gardens or trying to buy locally from farmers markets. This is the time of year when it is easy to do, since farmers markets are open for business statewide. Yet there is still time to plant some of your own fruits and vegetables.

When home gardeners think fruit, they typically think peaches, which are one of the toughest fruits for a home gardener to grow successfully without a spray program for diseases and insects. Thankfully, there are a number of fruit crops which are a tad more forgiving.

Fruit crops are typically divided into two categories—small fruits and tree fruits. In general small fruits are the easiest to incorporate into a home landscape, since they take up less space, and begin to fruit in a relatively short amount of time. For the most part, they also don’t need rigorous spray schedules. All fruit crops need full sun and supplemental watering during dry periods. Fertilization schedules and pest problems vary by crop.

Arkansas is blessed to have a large fruit breeding program at the University of Arkansas. The University has set the standard for blackberry production world-wide, and they are key players in grapes and blueberry varieties. The Clarksville Fruit Sub-station is the hub of research for the fruit program, and the University has released many varieties of fruit crops that are available at local nurseries.

We are in the middle of strawberry season now and they are easy plants to grow. All they need is a well-drained soil and full sun. Hill up the rows and plant—planting on a small hill aids in drainage and can help with weed control. They can be planted in a stand-alone strawberry bed or planted to the side of your vegetable garden or flower bed. Most commercial growers are now treating them as annuals, planting new crops each fall and harvesting in the spring and then using the ground for other crops. In home gardens, they are perennials, with larger plantings each year. They need to be thinned out after harvest to ensure healthy plants which aren’t too crowded. Fruit rots are more of an issue with overcrowding. Slugs can also be a challenge. There are many varieties to choose from with both “June-bearing” and “everbearing” types. I prefer the once a year “June-bearing” production types. For the “everbearing” you may have fruit over an extended period of time, but never enough to do anything with unless you have a lot of strawberry plants. In Arkansas, the strawberry season usually starts in April and is over by early June depending on the variety.

Blueberries will be the next small fruit crop to begin coming into production and there are many varieties available. Most blueberries need another variety to cross-pollinate with to ensure fruit set. If you have a new self-fruitful variety, it will produce better if there is another variety nearby. The three types of blueberries on the market are Highbush, which grow in the northern half of Arkansas, Rabbiteye for the southern half and the Southern Highbush which do well in central and southern Arkansas. Blueberries need a well-amended, well-drained acidic soil, and they are not drought

tolerant. Mulching and an irrigation system is a must. They are easy to incorporate into a garden as an edible ornamental, since they have showy white flowers in the spring, pretty, edible blue fruit in the summer and outstanding red fall foliage. They do produce a multi-stemmed bush with the mature height varying from 3 feet to 6 feet based on variety. Best production is usually on three to four year old canes, but you want an even number of 1,2, 3 and 4 year old canes for a long-producing plant. As canes get much older than four years, they tend to be woodier and less productive. Pruning of blueberries is done in the winter months when they are dormant. The biggest pest problem is birds—they love the fruit as much as you do. For a small home planting, bird netting is the best method for protection.

Many of us remember picking wild blackberries in the summer, coming home with scratched arms from the thorns and a nice case of chiggers, but some delicious fruit! Today's blackberries put those wild ones to shame. Arkansas has long been the leading breeder of blackberry varieties and there is an impressive array of varieties to choose from. All of the blackberry cultivars developed by the University of Arkansas have been named after Native American Indian tribes. My favorites are the thornless varieties including 'Apache', 'Arapaho', 'Ouachita' and 'Navaho'. Once you have harvested blackberries from a thornless plant, you will never want to pick from a thorny one again, even though there are some excellent thorny varieties. Give blackberries a spot in the garden where they can grow and expand, but be prepared to contain them as they begin to spread. By choosing your plants wisely you can start producing in late May and still be picking fruit in late July. Blackberries produce their fruit on the canes that grew last year. After you have finished harvesting, prune those fruiting canes out making room for the new canes which will have your crop next year. Keep the new canes pruned to a manageable height to aid in picking and to produce a fuller plant.

Raspberries are more of a challenge to grow in Arkansas, but it can be done. Raspberries prefer a milder summer than we usually have, but if you properly manage them, they can be productive for several years. The further south you go in the state, the tougher it is to maintain them. 'Dormanred' and 'Heritage' are the best varieties for the heat of our summers.

The last of the small fruit crops for Arkansas gardens are grapes. Again, there are several categories with table grapes, wine grapes and muscadines. Muscadines are the easiest of the grapes to grow, and require the least amount of maintenance. If you have a chain link fence or an arbor, new self-fruitful varieties can be planted and then sit back and harvest in late summer to early fall. A general pruning needs to be done annually before new growth begins. Table and wine grapes need a more precise spray schedule and usually a training or trellising system. All members of the grape family are prolific vine producers, so they do need annual pruning to keep producing at peak performance. The University of Arkansas has released numerous grape varieties, this time with the name of the planets. 'Mars', 'Jupiter', 'Venus' and 'Saturn' are outstanding varieties, but my favorite for flavor is 'Reliance'.

If you are interested in producing some small fruits along with the vegetables and flowers in your garden, there are many resources for you to use on our extension website at www.uaex.edu. A list of recommended varieties for each crop is <http://www.uaex.edu/yard-garden/fruits-nuts/berries.aspx>. As with any type of gardening, start small and build on success. With proper selection and care you can

start harvesting some things this summer, but you can continue to harvest for years to come. And in the meantime—don't forget about the farmers markets!