

# Exotic Berries: Introducing Aronia, Acai, and More

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You already know that berries are considered nutritional superstars, offering lots of bang for the (low) calorie buck. But if you've been sticking to old standbys like strawberries, blueberries, and raspberries, you may be wondering if you're missing out. What's the deal with these lesser-known berries?

## Acai Berries

Over the past couple of years there's been a proliferation of foods and beverages that contain acai, a berry that originates in the rainforests of South America. These round purple berries resemble grapes or blueberries and are said to taste like blackberries with perhaps a hint of chocolate aftertaste. They offer a wealth of antioxidants and can be eaten raw, taken in tablets, or consumed in juice and smoothies.

You may have heard of acai berries as a nearly magical cure-all for a wide array of ills. But Leigh Tracy, RD, LDN, a dietitian at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, urges consumers to take a more balanced view: Acai "has been called a superfood that will help with numerous health concerns related to weight loss, cancer, high cholesterol, detoxification, and overall health; however, there are no definitive human studies showing this to be true. These berries may be a good source of fiber, antioxidants, and heart-healthy fats, but further research is needed."

## Aronia Berries

Originating in the eastern part of the United States and mostly found in swamps and woodlands, this dark purple berry with a rather tart flavor is typically used to make juice, either blended with other fruit juices or on its own. Although they haven't been well promoted in this country, those in the know laud aronia, also known as chokeberry, for its healthful properties. "It is high in phytonutrients [substances found in plants] that are beneficial to human health," says **Franci Cohen**, MS, a certified nutritionist, fitness trainer, and exercise physiologist in Brooklyn, NY. "The berries are high in vitamins, minerals, and folic acids. They are also one of the richest plant sources of phenolic substances, mainly proanthocyanins and anthocyanins." (Phenolic substances are known to play a part in cancer prevention and treatment.) In this, aronia is a particularly good choice: It contains 1,480 mg of anthocyanins per 100 grams of fresh fruit weight, perhaps more than any other berry.

Although the decision to try aronia berries may be an easy one to make, finding them might be a little harder. You'll have the best luck at natural foods stores and online marketplaces.

## Loganberries

Loganberries are a cross between blackberries and raspberries, though they're larger than both. And while these dark red jewels taste pretty tart, perhaps deterring some people from eating them raw, they lend themselves well as an ingredients in a variety of foods—**Cohen** pronounces them "ideal" for jams, preserves, pies, and fruit salads. The berries abound in calcium, zinc, iron, selenium, magnesium, potassium, fiber, as well as a multitude of vitamins. **Cohen** points out that they are also rich in antioxidants and may help prevent certain autoimmune diseases and cancers. Loganberries tend to be a regional treat, enjoying uncommon popularity in western New York and southern Ontario, but products can be purchased online.

### **Goji Berries**

Grown in China on the lycium shrub, these berries—eaten raw or dried or drunk as juice—have gained a following as an antidote to such conditions as diabetes, high blood pressure, and cancer. According to the National Institutes of Health, however, there isn't sufficient evidence to support the use of goji to treat these or any other health conditions. Moreover, caution during pregnancy is recommended: There is concern that a chemical in goji called betaine may cause miscarriage.

### **The Bottom Line**

While these berries sound appealing and (like other fruits) offer nutritional benefits, if you can't find them—or aren't wowed by their taste—don't fret. The most important thing is to eat a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables, exotic or not, according to Elizabeth Somer, MA, RD, author of *Food and Mood*.

"These fad foods are given an unproven health halo," Somer says, adding that compared to the thousands of studies on readily available produce, "The research on the latest exotic and pricey fad berry is meager." She also points out that since most of these berries are grown outside the US, or only in specific locations within the country, transporting them can be costly both to your wallet and the environment.

*Elizabeth Somer, MA, RD, and Leigh Tracy, RD, reviewed this article.*

### **Sources**

Interview with [Elizabeth Somer, MA, RD](#).

Interview with [Leigh Tracy, RN, LDN](#).

Interview with [Franci Cohen, MS](#).