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Berries: Summer Treats That Are a Powerhouse of Nutrition

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PIKETON, Ohio — What if you had access to a product that had a strong potential to help you fight off the onset of cancer or arrest the growth of established malignancies? What if evidence showed it could potentially forestall the aging process and keep your mind sharp well into old age? What if this same substance contained chemical compounds that could lower your risk of heart attack? Wouldn't you eagerly travel far and wide to locate such an important piece of the health puzzle?

No need to search exotic locals for a mysterious herb or ask for a wonder drug at your pharmacy, look no further than your corner grocery store or local farm market for this miracle food; its berries. The same berries you're used to seeing in your morning muffin are capable of providing nutrients that can improve your health and the quality of your life for years to come.

Scientific studies are reporting new information on the nutraceutical and phytochemical properties of berries everyday. Nutraceutical is a term coined to describe the growing link between nutrition and health. We have all been aware that what we eat directly influences our health, but new investigations into the role of phytochemicals have shown that eating foods high in elements, such as antioxidants, may provide you with greater health benefits. Phytochemicals, from the Greek root "phyto" meaning plant, are naturally occurring compounds that plants use to fight off disease. When consumed by humans, in the form of food, research shows that they offer protection from the diseases associated with aging such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer and hypertension and may forestall mental aging and perhaps fight off Alzheimer's Disease. Phytochemicals are part of the phenolic family.

Anthocyanins are phenolic compounds that give berries their blue and red pigments. They are extremely high in antioxidants; in fact raspberries and blackberries, which are high in anthocyanins, are among the top five foods containing the highest antioxidant levels. Antioxidants help reduce the oxidation of LDL cholesterol and thus may help prevent cardiovascular disease; they also "sponge up" free radicals preventing them from damaging DNA, thus fighting cancer formation. In addition to anthocyanins, berries contain quercetin and kaempferol, which also act as antioxidants.

