



John Driscoll, Jeremy Segal, and Meghan Driscoll, all of Stowe, do a good job of filling their pint containers. When they are done picking, children may go swimming in the pool. The berries from Stowe Hollow Blueberries are certified organic. Walt (Doc) and Lillian Zuber. Inset: Blueberries on the bush.

# Stowe Hollow Blueberries

Story & Photographs  
Kate Carter



Walt and Lillian Zuber's blueberry fields are situated on eight sunny acres on a northwesterly facing slope in Stowe Hollow, just off North Hollow Road. When you're standing in the middle of the blueberries you can see all of Mt. Mansfield, from the forehead to the chin, and the ribbons of ski trails in between. In the upper blueberry field, a red horse barn topped with a cupola is filled with gardening equipment and the supplies needed to package hundreds of pints of blueberries. Downhill from the barn is the sprawling farmhouse where the Zubers raised their five children, and between the barn and the house is a sparkling swimming pool surrounded by tables, chairs, and shade umbrellas. Perennial gardens and a lawn large enough for several games of croquet separate the upper and lower fields. On a hot day in August, birds twitter in the trees, butterflies land on the joe-pye weed, a cat saunters by.



Berry picker Jeremy Segal of Stowe. Laura Streets, of Morrisville, and Diana Duclos, of Stowe, come to the Zubers to pick berries and enjoy the surroundings. Jocelyn Jones (daughter of noted artist Carroll Jones, Jr.) packs blueberries to be sold at local retail outlets. Plump, juicy blueberries.

This is the home of Stowe Hollow Blueberries, from which come the pints of plump, juicy blueberries we see every July, August, and September at local grocery stores and farm stands in Stowe. A whopping 4,000 blueberry bushes grow here, enough to keep pickers busy from sunup to sundown during peak picking season. Not all the berries go to retail outlets; anyone is welcome to come any time and “pick your own” blueberries. Even birds freely indulge, and in the fall, bears come by to snack on the leftovers.

Walt (a.k.a. Doc or Doctor Z) and Lillian Zuber came to Vermont from Madison, N.J., in 1974. Walt, a dentist, retired from his Stowe practice 10 years ago, while Lillian, an artist, owns The Art Gallery at the three-way intersection in town. They bought the property on North Hollow Road because it was

a perfect place for horses. Their children were involved in equestrian-related activities, but eventually, cultivating blueberries replaced riding as the family hobby.

“Picking blueberries was the first job I ever had,” says Walt, who is the driving force behind the acquisition of the 4,000 bushes that fill the former horse pastures.

“As he’s aged, he’s reverted to his childhood. They say that happens, you know,” chimes in Lillian. The couple has been married for 55 years and like any couple who has been together that long, they spar, tease, argue, banter, and occasionally finish each other’s sentences.

Initially, Walt’s farming vision didn’t include blueberries at all. He wanted to grow fruit trees on the well-fertilized horse pastures, and the first thing he planted in the late 1970s was a

Manchurian apricot orchard. Stowe’s climate was too harsh for the trees (only seven are left), so in 1980 he switched to the more forgiving blueberry (*Vaccinium*) bushes. “We started with about 200 bushes and over the next 12 or 13 years we added 5,000. Some have died and now we have about 4,000,” Walt says.

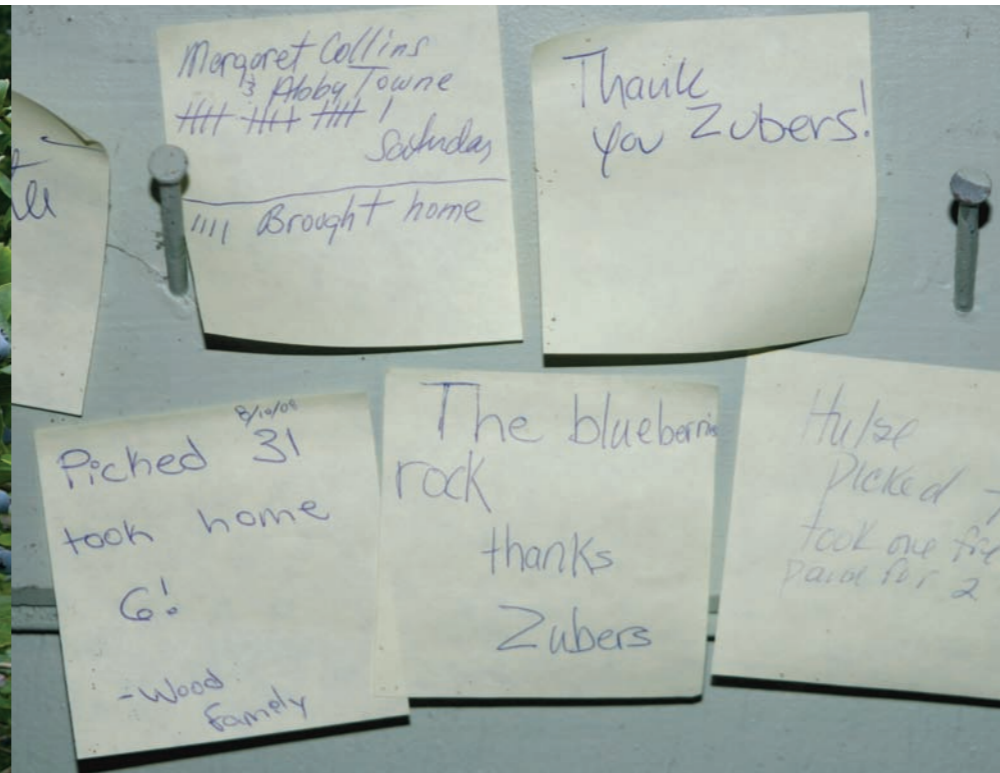
The bushes come from a grower in Michigan, and eventually Blue Crop, Blue Ray, and Patriot proved to be the most suitable for Stowe Hollow’s Zone 4 climate. “Besides hardiness, we chose the plants for taste, not for picking,” Walt says, so the berries don’t necessarily grow to a uniform size or in big, easy-to-pick clusters. But they sure do taste good—not too tart, not too sweet.

“In his divine wisdom, he also planted late bloomers to extend the season,” says Lillian. “Some years we’ve been up there in

### The Bang in the Blueberry



Blueberries rank number one in antioxidant benefits, compared to 40 other fresh fruits and vegetables. Antioxidants help neutralize harmful free radicals that can lead to cancer and other age-related diseases. The total antioxidant capacity of blueberries is twice that of spinach and three times that of oranges. This extraordinary fruit is also rich in pectin, a soluble fiber that has been shown to help lower cholesterol. Fresh blueberries are also high in vitamins A, C, K, and manganese. A cup of blueberries provides nearly a third of the RDA for vitamin C (unfortunately, most of the vitamin C is lost when the berries are frozen or canned). One cup of blueberries has 84 calories (21 grams of carbohydrates and 1 gram of protein) and 4 grams of fiber.



Blueberry bushes enjoy a fabulous view of Mount Mansfield. Pickers pick on the honor system. They can pay for their berries or barter their time—pick three pints for the Zubers and keep one for themselves. The Zubers' farm with its acres of blueberry bushes nestled amid the mountains.

October, picking with gloves on. The season is long and we don't get a lot of other things done," she adds.

Planting that many bushes seems like a daunting task, and if you had to do it alone, it would be nearly impossible. But Walt solicited assistance from low-income clients who had outstanding bills for dental work, and bartered labor for a clean slate. It was a win-win situation for everyone.

**T**oday, the Zubers still employ the barter system. Visitors who come to pick their own blueberries can pay \$3.50 a pint, or pick four for the Zubers and keep a fifth for themselves. It's all done on the honor system, and people come and go, leaving either a note, cash, or check for what they took. "Once I came into the barn and found someone had left five loaves of bread," laughs Lillian.

"The best pickers are boys between 10 and 13," Lillian points out. "They're neither fish nor fowl—not old enough to get a job, but old enough to want a job. The girls are starting to catch on, too," she adds. "The best part is when they are done, they can go for a swim in the pool—but not until they are done picking—and what kid doesn't like that?"

"The majority of people who come to pick are women looking for quiet time. Sometimes I'll walk out to the fields in the morning and call out, 'Who's here?' and heads will pop up and

I'll see a dozen women who I didn't even know were out there," says Lillian. "One of the best things about having the blueberries is the people we meet. We have met some very lovely people."

In exchange for the pints they take home, the extra berries the public picks get packaged in those familiar turquoise berry boxes, labeled, and loaded into flats for delivery to retail outlets. In addition to visitor pickers, there are also a few resident pickers. Acclaimed artist Carroll Jones, Jr., lives in an adjacent apartment, and when he's not painting or teaching a class, he's picking berries. His daughter, Jocelyn, also lives there. Walt and Lillian call her the chief berry picker, but that's not all she does. Jocelyn runs the "shipping department," working evenings so the flats are ready to be picked up and delivered to various locations the next morning. During peak season, she might package over 100 pints in an evening. The berries are certified organic and bear the Vermont Department of Agriculture seal of approval.

Walt and Lillian are not sure how long they will continue to live on North Hollow Road and maintain the blueberry bushes that provide an activity that has become a summer tradition in Stowe. The Zubers are approaching their 80s, and like many people of their generation they are considering other living situations that won't require the upkeep their farmhouse, gardens, and blueberries do. Lillian still paints and buzzes around the

property in a golf cart, but Walt's eyesight is failing; he has macular degeneration and can't care for the plants like he used to. Their property taxes have climbed steadily and it's beginning to cost too much to keep the place going. Ideally, they would like to sell the property to someone who will continue the blueberry tradition, or at least farm the land, but they don't expect that will happen. It's possible they could sell the bushes to an orchard, and that would close the book on Stowe Hollow Blueberries forever.

Until then, there is still plenty of picking to be done. The berries start to ripen in mid-July and continue well into September. Stowe Hollow Blueberries is located about a mile up North Hollow Road on the right-hand side, #948. No need to call ahead. Anyone is welcome to come by, take in the view, pick a few pints, enjoy a picnic, and go for a swim in the pool. You'll be glad you did, because really, there is nothing quite like a warm, ripe, juicy blueberry that goes straight from the bush to the mouth. ■

## Foolproof Blueberry Crisp

### TOPPING

1 cup quick cooking rolled oats  
 ¾ cup brown sugar  
 ½ cup flour  
 1 tsp. cinnamon  
 6 tbsp. butter

### FILLING

4 cups blueberries  
 ¼ cup flour  
 ½ cup sugar  
 ¼ tsp. salt  
 1 tbsp. fresh lemon juice  
 2 tbsp. butter

For the topping, combine the ingredients until you have a crumbly mixture. For the filling, combine the ingredients. Lightly coat a 12-inch by 12-inch baking dish with Pam. Pour in the filling. Top with the topping. Bake at 375 degrees for 35 minutes. Serve warm with vanilla yogurt or ice cream. Enjoy!