

“When is *Not* a Fruit, Actually a Fruit?”

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“All superfluous branches
We lop away, that bearing boughs may live. . .”

(Richard II, Act III, William Shakespeare)

“Ol' man Simon, planted a diamond.
Grew hisself a garden the likes of none.
Sprouts all growin' comin' up glowin'
Fruit of jewels all shinin' in the sun.”

(“Earful of Cider,” Shel Silverstein)

Ah, fruit! That sweet, delicious, juicy morsel consumed only from the kitchen table bowl at breakfast or as part of a sumptuous dessert. Apples, bananas, pears, you know the routine. But is that really the full understanding of fruit? If we were to gather a large group of Central Maine Garden Newsletter readers and ask folks to raise their hand if they have a vegetable garden, a pretty fair number would go up. If we then asked who grows fruit, I’m betting a lot of those hands would go back down.

If you think you’d be among them, you might want to rethink things.

Fruit, botanically speaking, is the ripened, fertilized ovary and affiliated tissues of a flowering plant—which means that many of the things we eat that are considered vegetables are actually fruits. If the part you want from a prized champion in your garden needs pollination of its flowers to provide the food, then you’re looking for fruit, my friend. And there are many different kinds.



Pomes are fleshy fruits with numerous seeds contained in a cartilage-like core. Familiar favorites like apples, pears, and the less well-known quinces are members of this group.



Drupes are better known as “stone fruits”—peaches, mangos, cherries, plums, apricots. . . and, starting to move us out of the traditional culinary understanding of “fruit,” olives. In many cases, the savory nature of olives pigeonholes them as. . . well, maybe not vegetables, but probably not terribly fruit-ish.



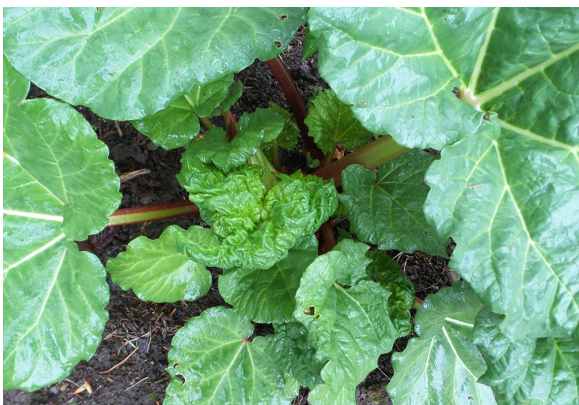
Berries are where it gets fun, because we tend to think of them as small, juicy, sweet treats. Yes, strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, etc. Also grapes.



Perhaps unexpectedly, though, tomatoes, eggplant, and peppers make their botanical appearance here! Cucumbers? Squash? Pumpkins? Melons? All four are in a sub-category of berry called a **pepo**. And lemons, limes, and grapefruit live in another sub-category, the **hesperidium** (essentially, a berry with a thick, leathery rind).



Moving even farther afield from the traditional popular conception of fruit, we find the **pulses** (the edible seeds of legume plant fruits—i.e., peas and beans), **grains** (fruit when whole kernel, seeds when the outer layers are removed) and **nuts** (a hard, edible fruit in a bony structure) nestled snugly in the fruit category. There are more examples to give—the botanical breakdown of fruits is byzantine—but hopefully you’re getting the idea of how many of our plant-based foods are actually fruits.





So, you may be asking yourself, what **is** a vegetable? Essentially, any part of a plant that doesn't grow from a fertilized flower qualifies—leafy greens (foliage), stalk items like celery or rhubarb (stems), and underground vegetables like carrots and potatoes (roots).

If so many fruits are not thought of as such—wearing “vegetable” disguises in our gardens and cookbooks to avoid detection—how did our popular understanding get so far off track? It's certainly true that the sweeter fruits tend to be consumed at breakfast, for snacks, and as part of desserts, with the bolder, more savory fruits lending themselves to partner with meat as part of the main dish. So part of the issue is simply culinary history. But we do have a smoking gun for the misconception on what might be the most egregious case of mistaken identity, the beloved tomato. A legal dispute at the Port of New York around the Tariff of 1893 (which mandated import taxes on vegetables, but not fruit) led the Supreme Court to rule that the tomato is not a fruit, regardless of botanical fact. Their decision argued that what people commonly think of as a vegetable versus fruit should carry the issue, and that they believed most people ate tomatoes with vegetables and meat.

You'll have to decide for yourself how far you want to take the responsibility of countering this longstanding mischaracterization, but be aware that your backyard vegetable garden might just be a backyard fruit garden!