

# Plums offer low-cost health benefits

By LEN RICHARDSON

**P**LUMS are rolling down the food fashion runway, sporting newly discovered high levels of healthy nutrients, say scientists at Texas AgriLife Research. The research was sponsored in part by the California Tree Fruit Agreement.

## Key Points

- The plum is an emerging star in the super-food world.
- Plums beat blueberries in comparison of disease-preventing nutrients.
- Nutrients in plums inhibited in vitro breast cancer growth.

“Blueberries have some stiff competition,” says Luis Cisneros, Texas AgriLife Research food scientist. “Stone fruits are super fruits, with plums as emerging stars.”

Far from fruit snobbery, the plum is being ushered in after Cisneros and David Byrne, Texas AgriLife Research plant breeder, found them to match or

exceed the much-touted blueberries in antioxidants and phytonutrients associated with disease prevention.

The duo acknowledges that blueberries remain a good nutritional choice. But Byrne says their findings are plum good news, especially in tight economic times, because one relatively inexpensive plum contains about the same amount of antioxidants as a handful of more expensive blueberries.

## Compared with blueberries

Discovery of the plum's benefits — along with that of fellow stone fruits, the peach and the nectarine — came after the researchers measured at least five brands of blueberries on the market. Against those numbers, the team measured the content of more than 100 different types of plums, nectarines and peaches.

The first comparison was for antioxidants, molecules that sweep through a body looking for free radicals to knock out. Free radicals are atoms or molecules that lurk where diseases like cancer and heart disease are found.

“If the radicals aren't taken care of,” Cisneros says, “they will cause the problems that lead to disease.”

But the scientists didn't stop at determining that plums and peaches were flexing their antioxidant muscles.

“We went to the next step — how these compounds could actually inhibit chronic diseases,” Cisneros says.

## Defining benefits

The team examined the full content of plums and peaches and then tested the effect of the compounds they found on breast cancer cells and cholesterol.

“We screened the varieties again with the biological assays,” Cisneros says. “And that had never been done before because it is expensive and a lot of work. But that investment is small in terms of the information we got and how it can be used now for breeding efforts to produce even better fruit.”

Byrne notes, for example, that one benefit the team found was that the phytonutrients in plums inhibited in vitro breast cancer growth without adversely affecting normal cell growth.

“Future work with stone fruits will focus on cardiovascular and cancer using animal models and identification of specific compounds that exert the properties,” Cisneros adds.

The Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center at Texas A&M University also provided funding for the research.



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**HEALTH WINNER:** One relatively inexpensive plum contains about the same amount of antioxidants as a handful of more expensive blueberries.

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