

Berry Berry Bountiful

written by Jim Casada

Spring through summer is the time to grab a pail and venture out to pick wild berries.

Some of my most cherished childhood memories center on countless spring and summer days spent picking and plucking nature's rich bounty. Berrying and related pursuits such as nut gathering provided me precious pocket money and the essentials for all sorts of tasty treats, along with days of glorious fun.

Those shining moments in the high country sun lie some four decades in the past. But in terms of abundance and availability, the North Carolina soil remains as liberal as ever when it comes to berries—from wild strawberries in spring to the huckleberries of late summer, and from early harvests of serviceberries to the stunning plenitude of blackberries in midsummer. With dewberries, raspberries, elderberries and blueberries thrown in for good measure, tasty treats await those with enough gumption to gather them.

Of all nature's edible wild wonders, my personal preference is the strawberry. The patron saint of angling, Izaak Walton, shared my taste. Writing well over three centuries ago, he summed up the virtues of these scrumptious scarlet morsels: "Doubtless God could have made a better berry, but doubtless God never did."

Mankind has succeeded in producing bigger, hardier berries, but when it comes to the crucial matter of taste, the wild strawberry puts its domesticated cousins to shame. Adorning meadows, rural roadsides and abandoned fields, these tasty little jewels could convince even a die-hard Texan that bigger is not necessarily better.

On the other hand, should you be fortunate enough to locate a patch of wild strawberries in fertile ground, such as a humus-rich river bottom or a long-deserted homeplace, you might be pleasantly surprised at how large these rich, red delights grow. Size is secondary to substance, however, and these nuggets of wild sweetness are guaranteed to tempt even the most jaded of palates.

Good things almost never come easily, and strawberries require work. Picking them can be back-breaking labor, although it is amazing how an occasional sampling of one's harvest alleviates the agony. Once a respectable quantity of strawberries has been gathered (you never really get enough), the substantial chore of capping the fruit still remains.

Nonetheless, the end product is worth it all, be it berries and cream, the inexpressible pleasure of homemade shortcake smothered in strawberries and topped with ice cream, or maybe a splashing of jam to give a piping-hot biscuit a college education. With these wild wonders, you have the stuff of which caloric dreams are made. For my part, though, give me the unadulterated purity of a fully ripe strawberry, still glistening with dew. Here is the true ambrosia of the gods.



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Black bear and blackberries—not just humans enjoy the succulent wild fruits.

Strawberry Secrets

- Layer hot pancakes with butter or margarine and fresh wild strawberries with a dusting of confectioners' sugar.
- Add brightness, sweetness and texture to fresh fruit salads or compotes with a few wild strawberries.
- Add crushed wild strawberries to fresh lemonade or limeade for color and flavor.
- Drizzle hot chocolate sauce over bowls of fresh wild strawberries for an easy, elegant dessert.
- Combine a pint of wild strawberries with 1/3 cup sugar, 1/4 teaspoon rum flavoring and 1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice in a blender and puree. Serve over ice cream, pound cake, pudding or custard.
- Try a few wild strawberries in a glass of champagne.
- Add orange juice, peel or flavoring to complement wild strawberries quite nicely.

Strawberries begin to ripen in May, and their reddening roundness is the truest harbinger of spring's full-fledged arrival. Cuddled snug against the earth's warm bosom, strawberries are almost as delightful to behold as they are to consume. A motley tribe when it comes to appearance, some are long and slender with protruding necks, which make for easy capping. Others are tiny, round capsules of garnet that come a dozen to the mouthful. And there are those splendid giants of the wild strawberry world that rival the size of their tame relatives. Whatever their shapes and proportions, though, all share the taste that makes them the true aristocrats of the berry world.

By way of contrast, one of the next berries to make its annual ripening appearance is of distinctly humble origins. The child of farmed-out land and barren patches of red clay, this black beauty is frequently overlooked. Yet country connoisseurs welcome its seasonal return with a joy born of past experience, for they recognize the dewberry's true merits. Poets may not have sung the dewberry's praise, but virtues it has—and in abundance.

The glories of a dewberry cobbler are such that it may be just as well for relatively few to know of them. This culinary marvel can best be appreciated through personal experience, as opposed to trying to describe it in words. It is only fitting that this tough, brier-laden vine, which manages to eke out an existence against all odds, has commonly

given its fruits to those who live close to the soil and know so well the toil required to wrest a living directly from the land. Folks of the same ilk, who have scratched and fought on hardscrabble farms for generations, have the proper perspective to give the lowly dewberry its due.

It is one tough customer, both in lifestyle and when it comes to picking. In its ripened finery, however, it'll thrill even the choosiest of gourmets (provided such citified types ever have the chance to sample this elusive berry).

Actually, dewberries aren't at all uncommon. Find a field or pasture that has been neglected for a year or two almost anywhere in the Tar Heel landscape—an eroding hillside where seemingly nothing but kudzu would grow, or even a patch of land that has been scraped for some long-abandoned building project—and you'll likely discover dewberries. Every devoted rabbit hunter can recall tripping over the low-running, treacherous vines, for they furnish precisely the sort of habitat Br'er Rabbit likes to call home.

Dewberries are close cousins of what is far and away the best-known of the wild brambles, not to mention wild berries: the luscious, omnipresent blackberry. Old Will Shakespeare, who seemed to know something about most everything, once wished (in *King Henry IV*) that "reasons were as plentiful as blackberries." He was right on the mark. Botanists indicate that there are literally hundreds of subspecies of blackberries, and anyone who has picked a pailful has likely noticed subtle variations in

their appearance and nature. In fact, genetic engineering has now produced a thornless blackberry, a row of which makes a nice addition to the home garden.

With some degree of shame, I must confess to having had a row of these in my garden for a time. I soon saw the error of my ways, thanks to their distinctly inferior taste. These uppity domesticated blackberries can't hold a candle to the wild, thorn-protected berries when it comes to flavor. Besides, no self-respecting berry picker feels that he has fulfilled all the requirements of his job until his hands are well-scratched, brier-riddled and stained a lovely purple-black hue. When it comes to blackberries, "No pain, no gain" is certainly the operative truism.

As a youngster I welcomed the time when blackberries began to ripen, around mid-June. Here, finally, was an acceptable chore, and one for which my parents and neighbors would actually pay "cash money" (the redundancy was my grandfather's, occasioned perhaps by the scarcity of the item in question). At 25 cents a gallon, it was unlikely I would become a berry-picking tycoon, but to an unknowing rural lad, that seemed like real fine wages. After all, a gallon of berries brought precisely the amount of money it cost to purchase a trout fly, and that was where a substantial portion of my earnings went. Today, if you can find blackberries for sale at all, they probably will fetch somewhere around \$10 a gallon. The last ones I saw looked suspiciously like the tame, thornless and less-tasty variety.

Blackberries were once important ingredients in rural life. There was always a final fling of bitter weather when the briars were in bloom, giving rise to the term "blackberry winter." Country folks often looked to this occurrence as a sure signal that the last frost had come and gone. Blackberries have historically figured in our livelihoods as well as our folk wisdom. Early pioneers dried them to make "berry leather" or mixed them with rendered fat and bits of dried venison to form pemmican. Entire families turned out for all-day pickings, hauling home gallons of the prized fruit. Properly processed and proudly aligned on cannery shelves, the rows of Mason jars extended summer's sweet ripeness far into the lean, mean times of winter. Alongside the quart jars holding the colorful promise of cobbler to come were pint jars of jam or preserves. What this condiment could do for a richly buttered cathead biscuit was almost sinful.



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A less widespread but still abundant

berry that ripens on about the same schedule as the blackberry is the wild raspberry. There are actually several types of wild raspberries. The most common and, to my way of thinking, tastiest variety is the "black cap." Readily identifiable at all seasons of the year thanks to the distinctive light purple color of its canes, the black raspberry can produce abundant crops along fencerows, on open banks or most anywhere it gets sufficient sun. Raspberries take a bit more work than blackberries because they are not as large, but they come free so easily that sometimes you can gather half a handful at a time. When it comes to taste, they fall somewhere between a blackberry and a dewberry, although each is delicately distinctive.

Chloe Sganga of Monroe (above, right) picks huckleberries along the Blue Ridge Parkway. Berries are an important food for many wildlife species, including white-tailed deer.



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Finding Berries

Most types of wild berries are early-succession plants. They thrive where there has been a recent fire, in locations previously devoted to agriculture, in cutover



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land, abandoned pastures and the like. Roadsides are also prime habitat, especially for blackberries. Thanks to the prominence of their blooms, blackberries and elderberries are easily located. For most other types of wild berries, knowing their preferred homes and doing some wandering in likely spots are the best ways to locate them. Huckleberries come on strong in the mountains after fires, whether controlled burns (seldom used in the region) or otherwise. One thing can be said with absolute certainty: Wild berries of one type or another are plentiful all across North Carolina. They are vastly underused, especially in today's fast-paced world.

Another fruit available almost anywhere you might live in North Carolina is the elderberry. Easily gathered, and without the thorns that guard many of its brethren, this particular berry is, today, almost totally overlooked. Once removed from the cluster of stems that hold them together, elderberries lend themselves to a variety of uses. They make a quite passable pie, toothsome jelly and a wine or cordial beyond compare. Indeed, for those inclined to sample an occasional libation, blackberries, raspberries and elderberries all produce a delicate wine that, when properly made, is sheer nectar.

Once elderberries have come and gone, the best of the summer's berrying is past. Nonetheless, huckleberries, blueberries and wild gooseberries remain, especially in the upper Piedmont and mountains of the state. Their small size makes for tedious picking, and low-lying huckleberries necessitate stooping. Still, the effort is worth it, particularly if you can locate an extensive patch. I've seen them covering acre upon acre, usually as new growth on ridges scarred by a forest fire. In a summer of good rainfall, they can be so plentiful that it is possible to grab dozens at once.

At least one other berry deserves passing mention. This is the serviceberry. (Mountain folks pronounce it "sarvis.") Service trees

can be found on ridges about anywhere in the high country, and they are easily marked thanks to being among the first trees to bloom in the spring. It is only along creeks, however, that they seem to produce fruit. To discover one laden with reddish-purple berries—usually while progressing up a trout stream—is all the reason one could ask to pause for an unexpected but most welcome snack. The berries have a mild, delicate flavor, and the seeds convey an almond-like taste. To my knowledge, serviceberries are best suited for eating in their raw form.

The devoted berry picker can enjoy two months or more of sampling and savoring nature's fresh gifts every year, although in the mountains berries do not ripen at the highest elevations until late summer. Freezing and canning the berries can provide fine fare for many more months to come. When fall and approaching winter post their "no berry picking" signs, every visit to the pantry or freezer brings a renewed sense of reward and tasty nostalgia to remind one of sunny days and berrying ways. The reality of those jams, preserves, syrups and frozen berries is the purest of simple pleasures, the sort that can be appreciated only by those who indulge in the enchanting, enduring wonders of pickin'. ☞

Berry Recipes

There are hundreds of ways to enjoy wild berries, and not all have to be served as desserts. This sampling comes from *Wild Bounty*, a game and wild foods cookbook written by the author and his wife.

Huckleberry Pie with Hazelnut Glaze

- 3 cups fresh or frozen huckleberries
 - 1 cup grated apple
 - 1 cup sugar
 - 3 tablespoons flour
 - 1/2 teaspoon almond extract
 - pastry for double pie crust
 - 2 tablespoons butter
 - several dashes of salt (optional)
- Mix huckleberries, grated apple, sugar, flour and almond extract. Pour into unbaked pie shell. Dot with butter. Cover with top crust and bake at 375 degrees for about an hour or until nicely browned. Top with hazelnut glaze (below) when you remove the pie from the oven.

Hazelnut Glaze

- 1/3 cup packed brown sugar
 - 3 tablespoons light cream
 - 1/2 cup finely chopped toasted hazelnuts
- Place sugar and cream in a small saucepan over low heat and stir constantly until the sugar melts. Stir in toasted, chopped hazelnuts. Drizzle over hot pie. **Tip:** This glaze can also be used on blackberry, blueberry, raspberry and dewberry pies.

Wild Berry Cobbler

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 cup milk
- 1/4 cup butter, melted
- 2–4 cups fresh blackberries, dewberries, elderberries, huckleberries, raspberries or strawberries

Combine flour, sugar, baking powder and milk. Stir with a wire whisk until smooth. Add melted butter and blend. Pour batter into a 9-by-13-inch baking dish. Pour berries (amount depends on personal preference) evenly over the batter. Do not stir. Bake at 350 degrees for 30–40 minutes or until golden brown. Serve warm with vanilla ice cream, whipped topping or milk. Serves 6–8.

Wild Strawberry Trifle

- 1 yellow cake mix, baked according to instructions
 - 1 quart wild strawberries, cooked slightly with sugar and a dash or two of Grand Marnier if desired (Reserve some fresh berries to decorate the top.)
 - 3 large vanilla pudding mixes (enough for 6 cups of milk) mixed according to instructions
 - 2 large containers whipped topping (24 ounces total)
- Cover the bottom of a large bowl with a layer of crumbled cake. Place a layer of strawberries over the cake, followed by a layer of pudding and one of whipped topping. Repeat the layers twice, ending with whipped topping and the fresh berries you reserved. Serves 16.
- Note:** This is a versatile recipe that works well with other berries, especially black raspberries.

Wild Strawberry Freezer Jam

- 2 cups crushed wild strawberries
 - 4 cups sugar
 - 1 package fruit pectin
 - 3/4 cup water
- Combine the strawberries and sugar, mixing thoroughly. Set aside for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Mix pectin with water in a small saucepan. Bring to a boil. Boil for one minute, stirring constantly. Remove from heat, add to fruit and stir constantly for three minutes. Pour quickly into sterilized glass or plastic containers with tight-fitting lids. Cover immediately. Let containers stand at room temperature for 24 hours. Place jam in the freezer. Frozen jam may be thawed in a microwave. **Tip:** For raspberries, blueberries, dewberries, elderberries or blackberries, use 3 cups crushed berries and 5 1/4 cups sugar.

Wild Berry and Spinach Salad

- 4 cups raw spinach, washed and torn
 - 1 cup hulled, rinsed and drained wild strawberries
 - 1 kiwi fruit, peeled and sliced (optional)
 - 2/3 cup chopped hazelnuts (or macadamia nuts or pecans)
- Combine all ingredients. Add dressing (below).

Dressing

- 2 tablespoons strawberry jam
 - 2 tablespoons cider vinegar
 - 1/3 cup oil
- Combine jam and vinegar in blender. Add oil gradually while processing. Pour desired amount of dressing over salad and toss gently. Should you be fortunate enough to find tender dandelion greens, they can be used in place of the spinach. **Tip:** Try wild raspberries and raspberry jam as a substitute for strawberries and strawberry jam.

