



Northwest coastal forests abound with berries. During late summer, down under the forest canopy, more than half of our shrubby native plants are dotted with berries, red, blue, orange, white, black. Growing amidst the wet and dark green forest tangle, berries make much ecological sense: if a plant's seeds are carried by the wind, they won't go far. Likewise, even the most wind-beaten berry won't take flight. But they are the most tasty, nutritious and sweet things to be eaten in the deep woods. Mammals and birds disperse berry-borne seeds far and wide, without complaint - caching them away, or passing the specially-adapted seeds unharmed through the digestive tract. Very simple. Very effective. And we - inept seed-dispersers all - are the beneficiaries of this forest choreography. It is time to eat.

But first, some words of warning. Among all of the other useful things urban kids learn in camp - how to sing "Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore" in rounds, for example, or weave festive ashtrays out of raffia - they also learn this: white berries usually are not edible, blue berries almost always are, and all unfamiliar red berries should be left alone until someone with more berry wisdom can come along and give them an official okay. And your camp counselors weren't kidding. This maxim should be chanted repeatedly as you head out into the woods, berry pail in hand. Likewise, the native peoples of this coast, berry experts by necessity, taught this to the uninitiated: only fools and the living dead ate white berries. Blue berries could be eaten without hesitation by children in the woods; red berries could not. The red berries belonged to "Wild Woman" a lewd and cannibalistic granny with super-human strength, dwelling in the deep woods - wild hair on her head, profuse body hair, evil-smelling breath, long pendulous breasts, razor sharp teeth, a booming voice, tattooed skin (some considered her a female Sasquatch; some readers may know her as Dzonokwa). And, as any long-ago native kid could have told you, if children ate red berries while they traveled alone in the forest they would be carted away by this Wild Woman, roasted for dinner, and eaten. End of story. The moral of this cautionary tale: you'd best bring the berry basket back to the longhouse, where you'll have plenty of parental supervision, before you try to eat any red berries.

But the abundance and diversity of truly edible berries in the Northwest is staggering. We have a wide variety of huckleberries and blueberries; these two berries, for all practical purposes, are the same thing - members of the genus *Vaccinium*, largely differentiated on the basis of their color. The plants with lighter blue berries are called "blueberries" and plants with darker purplish berries are called "huckleberries." Many of our blueberries do not fare well in clearcut environments, and only persist in our remaining mature forests; here we find oval-leaved and Alaska blueberries, and both are tasty when ripe. Two outstanding, sweet and tasty berries - the bog and dwarf blueberries - grow in our general area but only in hard-to-find places, low-elevation bogs or subalpine heaths. Evergreen huckleberries are far more common on this coast, with shiny dark evergreen leaves and tiny blue-black berries; these berries develop in late summer but often remain on the bush until winter, providing people and critters alike with late-season berries. There are also the widespread "red huckleberry" bushes on this coast, with berries that look like small red or pink blueberries - when ripe (and there is a window of about 5 minutes when they are

neither under-ripe nor overripe) they are very tasty and sweet. Local native people would sometimes pick them by running small wooden "berry rakes" through the foliage, wide enough to allow leaves to pass, but narrow enough to pull off the berries. The berries were then cleaned by being tumbled down a moistened cedar plank - the berries would roll and the leaves and stems would stick. Many botanists also include the native "bog cranberry" in the genus *Vaccinium* - in its tart flavor and preference for soggy places, this plant is very similar to domestic cranberries.

For all-around good eating, it's hard to beat the blackberries and raspberries, each of them sporting distinctive multi-chambered berries, what some botanists refer to (in the privacy of their own homes) as "tasty and dangling aggregates of drupelets." Locally, a lucky few might find the black raspberry or the creeping raspberry. And one is sure to find the widespread raspberry-like thimbleberry, with its soft leaves, rose-like flowers, and shallow, deep-red, thimble-like berries, which taste like sweet, seedy raspberries when ripe. Various blackberries twine and tangle through our environs, including the ubiquitous Himalayan blackberry, an introduced plant which grows on disturbed sites, with its huge, sweet, purple-black berries. The native, fruity-tasting "trailing blackberry" also is profoundly toothsome, but is an elusive *Rubus*, more common alongside logging roads. The salmonberry is also of this genus, a common plant with blackberry-like berries, watery, orange or red, sweet on rare occasion; such berries were too watery to preserve by most native peoples, but were very popular berries to eat fresh.

Salal, a brushy evergreen relative of the heaths and heathers, was probably the most important source of berries to this coast's indigenous inhabitants. The berries are sweet and juicy, with a flavor vaguely reminiscent of concord grapes - traditionally, they were eaten raw or pulverized and dried into cakes or "fruit leather" for storage. A close relative, the Oregon wintergreen, looks like a dwarf salal plant, and produces red, salal-like edible berries.

Clusters of tiny "red elderberries" also grow on tall, light green bushes along the coast - eaten raw they are awful, likely to cause nausea. You will wish you had thought twice. But cooked they become tasty, and ancient elderberry roasting pits still crouch below our coastal soil, where local folks rendered piles of these berries into cooked berry cakes, to be stored and eaten throughout the year. A short distance inland, blue elderberries are now appearing, a somewhat tastier berry which requires little processing. A good berry for wines and jams, the elderberry continues to be popular among industrious locals with abundant berries and patience.

In the coastal forests of the Northwest, we also have several currants or "gooseberries" of the genus *Ribes*, with small maple-like leaves and spiny stems. The small black berries of the "black gooseberry" are usually tasty, while the berries of the "stink current" has a flavor which varies widely, from awful to excellent. The "trailing black current" and the "red-flowering current" both have berries which are edible but not very palatable without additional ingredients and extensive processing.

Strawberries require no introduction. The extremely sweet small berries of the "coast strawberry" grow on local dunes and other well-drained sites, while closely-related wild strawberries of a different stripe grow nearby. But other local

berries are less well known. Here and there coastal residents can find the Saskatoon or "service berry," sweet, blue, looking like miniature apples, or the more bitter Indian plum, with fruits looking like miniature plums. Sometimes, we can also find the dwarf dogwood; each short plant bears a single, white dogwood flower which produces several red berries, tasting somewhat like salal - pulpy but very sweet. Crowberries, juicy and blue, grow atop low creeping bog plants that look like miniature fir trees. Red-orange rose hips from our native dwarf and Nootka roses are also edible - one scoops out the seeds and eats the rind. Sweet and full of vitamin C, these are popular sources of this vitamin for pharmaceutical use. One can also eat the berry-like fruits of two local trees, the wild crabapple and the black hawthorn. To our north, regrettably beyond our range, grow the "soapberries" which, when whipped with water, creates a tasty and edible thick foam, a dessert called "Indian ice cream" by some native people of Washington and B. C.

And then there are the berries you might only eat if you grow very hungry. Some local lilies, including the wild lily-of-the-valley and false Solomon's seal both produce watery and bland-tasting berries, starting off green and turning red as they mature. The red berries of the sand-dwelling kinnickinnick and hairy manzanita can be eaten, if you don't mind your berries pithy, pulpy, and lacking in flavor. The bitter red-orange berries of mountain ash can be eaten too, but are best when used to make tart jams and jellies. The blue berries of the Oregon grape are usually very bitter too, and native peoples often mixed them with other, sweeter berries (and also used the plant's inner bark as a yellow dye) - with artificial sweeteners, contemporary people make passable Oregon grape jellies and wines. The locally abundant honeysuckle, the twinberry, produces a pair of very dark purple berries which are barely palatable - most native peoples in this area called them "crow's berries," claiming that they were only suitable as food for crows. You will probably agree.

So happy picking and happy eating. Get out there on the fecund forest floor and take your part in the feeding frenzies of the late summer season. But before you do, we here at the Upper Left Edge encourage you to get a good field guide - I list some below. Check these guides before touching any unfamiliar berry. If you aren't sure, don't eat it - even berries that are eaten by birds and other critters of the forest floor can leave us hominids lying six feet under the forest lawn. This is no way to spend the dog days of summer. And if, while you pick berries, you are confronted by a wild-eyed old woman with tattoos and terrible breath, use your head. Just put down the berries and back away.

Nancy Turner's *Food Plants of Coastal First Peoples*. (University of B.C. Press, 1995) is an excellent guide to the edible plants of this area. Jim Pojar and Andy MacKinnon's *Plants of the Pacific Northwest Coast*. (Lone Pine Pub., 1994) is a very good all-purpose guide to regional plants, including berries. The B.C. publisher, Hancock House, has produced a number of brief edible plant guides for this region, including J.E. Underhill's *Wild Berries of the Pacific Northwest*. (1974) and *Northwestern Wild Berries* (1980), and Carol Batdorf's *Northwest Native Harvest* (1990).



Interested in learning more about the environments, cultures, and literatures of the coastal Northwest? Then you are invited to enroll in an interdisciplinary fall seminar at Clatsop Community College. Explore the northern Oregon coast by foot and by boat...write about the coastal places and coastal peoples you encounter. Instructors Doug DeMar (author of "Ecologia" for *The Upper Left Edge*) and Carol Knutson (author of "Rube Montage" for *Hippie*) will teach the course on Saturdays, from Sept. 26 to Dec. 12. Students register for both Geography 199 (Cultural Geography of the Pacific Northwest) and English 199 (Literature of the Pacific Northwest). College credit is optional. For more information, call (503)738-3346. Operators are standing by.



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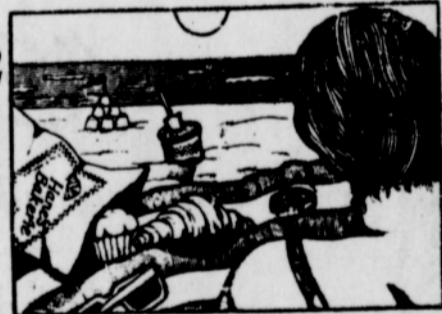
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I know you believe you understand what you think I said. But I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant. Patrick Murray



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