

# Foraging edible berries

BY REBECCA LEXA

Berry season has arrived in the Columbia-Pacific region, with several native species of edible berries widely available along the coast, in the mountains or both.

Red huckleberries are finishing up their ripe season, though some stray berries may remain. Evergreen huckleberries are just now getting ready to harvest. This large, bushy shrub can be identified by its small, oval leaves with pointed tips and finely-serrated edges.

These leaves are dark green and have a waxy appearance. The berries, which are quite flavorful, grow in small clusters toward the ends of the branches, dark blue to black, small and perfectly round.

Leaves of salal are similar, but much larger. The berries of this common shrub grow in rows along pink-tinged twigs, dangling underneath from small stems. These berries are a dark blue to purple tone and are round, about the size of blueberries.

Their taste also resembles blueberries, though they are lighter tasting and a bit mealy in texture. Salal often grows in large thickets and individual plants may reach up to 10 feet tall.

While our area features multiple species of blackberry, only trailing blackberries are native to the region. These berries grow on a thin vine with sharp thorns. The plant's leaves, which are somewhat triangular and have serrated edges, usually grow in groups of three on a stem.

This vine often climbs over other plants and structures without smothering them. The berries are smaller than those grown commercially, but are still quite tasty.

Two invasive blackberry species, Himalayan and cutleaf, grow on heavy canes that can bend into arches if long enough. Their ripe berries are much larger and many may be harvested from dense thickets. Every nonnative blackberry picked and eaten is one less eaten by a bird that may spread seeds somewhere else – so help yourself.

Thimbleberries are often surprising for those who don't realize the fruit is edible. These red berries are softer in texture and more hemispherical in shape than blackberries, looking rather like a piece of candy growing on the plant.

The leaves of thimbleberries are large and have five lobes, similar to maple leaves. The plants can reach 8 feet in height.

All of the berries above may be found in forests and clearings along the coast. Up in



the mountains, however, is the best place to find blackcap raspberries.

The leaves and canes of this berry plant are similar to domesticated raspberries, but the berries are a dusty black, similar to a blackberry in color. Look for a white layer of coating on the stems of this plant, which gives it another name – the white-bark raspberry.

If you're looking for berries on public land, make sure that foraging is allowed. Some areas, such as Willapa National Wildlife Refuge, prohibit taking any natural or cultural items. If foraging is allowed, be aware that permits may be needed and limits may apply. Always ask permission before foraging on private land.

Be aware of plant damage as you forage, too. Even breaking small branches can open up a plant to disease. Don't take more than 25% of the berries on one bush or vine, with the exception of nonnative blackberries.

Berries are important food for wildlife, including black bears, who eat many in the summer as they fatten up for winter. If you're within range of bears, make a little noise as you forage to avoid startling a bear searching within the same thicket.

Also, be mindful of insects, spiders and other small animals when foraging – it's all too easy to accidentally take them home. Try collecting berries in a colander before transferring them to a bucket or other container to give small wildlife a chance to escape.

Eat berries while foraging or wait for a wash at home. Note that thimbleberries are quite delicate and will rot quicker than other species, so they should be eaten or preserved as soon as possible.

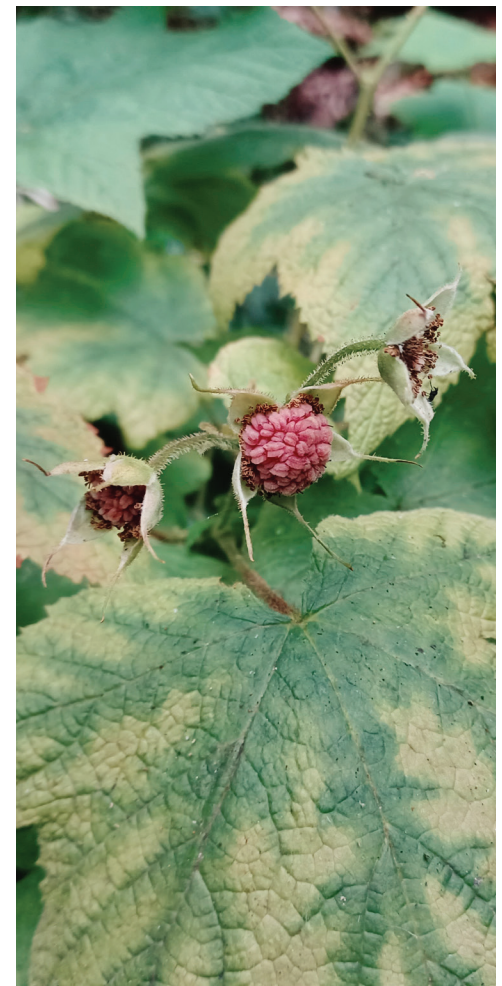
All of the berries above can be incorporated into jams and jellies, alone or within a blend of species. Treasure August, it's the season of these delicious harvests.

*Rebecca Lexa is a naturalist, nature educator, tour guide and writer living on the Long Beach Peninsula. Find more about her work at [rebeccalex.com](http://rebeccalex.com).*



Photos by Rebecca Lexa

**ABOVE:** Blackberries on the vine, at various stages of growth. **LEFT:** Ripe salal berries sit in a row, growing on a common coastal plant. **RIGHT:** A ripe thimbleberry grows on a shrub. **BELOW:** A bright red huckleberry, similar looking to a cherry, awaits harvest.



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