

Hogtown HomeGrown

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Black bears and blackberries

The bear walked through the brush and into the yard just after we sat down on the cabin’s porch with our brunch plates. He didn’t look interested in us, but I was worried he might have designs on our smoked salmon scrambles, so we jumped up and hurried inside—before I got a picture—oh well.

My assumption that he wasn’t interested in us was not a completely uneducated guess. On a walk the evening before, we had come across patch after patch of thorny, ripening blackberries. And we had seen deer tracks and undetermined paw prints near one large patch at the top of the hill. Those paw prints were just the right size for our bear friend. He was probably just taking a shortcut to a midmorning berry snack.

Now don’t think for a minute that I am talking about those grocery store, big-as-your-thumb blackberries that pop with juice in your mouth. Their boring sameness turns flat when compared with the thrill of wild blackberries. Dependant on rain and sun for moisture and sweetness, picking and eating from a patch of blackberries can be a sweet-tart rollercoaster.

Granny knew where all the wild vines were. When I was a kid visiting her in Georgia, she taught me at a young age to spot blackberries growing along unkempt fences beside country roads. We’d fill a cup if we had one, a Kleenex if we didn’t, savoring a few in the car and bringing the rest home to share. If we were really fortunate, we could pick enough to make a cobbler or crisp, but our bounty usually only accompanied dessert; just a few wild morsels to savor with our poundcake or ice cream.

When our sons were young, we took several trips on southern country roads and I remember pulling over to pick blackberries with them—pulling out a cup or tissue, just like Granny did. I still look for wild vines when I travel country roads, but most landowners keep their fence lines neat and trimmed, whether by mechanical or chemical means, and blackberries are seldom found that way anymore.

We had a napkin in the car when Jeff and I discovered the first small blackberry vine on the dirt road leading to our borrowed cabin in the North Georgia mountains. We were ready for a week of quiet, reading and home-cooked meals. Before we hit the road, we shopped at the Saturday farmers markets, so we had a cooler full of local food from home. The few blackberries we picked were a welcome “very local” addition to our dessert that night.

During our week, we found more and more patches of blackberries and even a wild blueberry bush or two. Several rain storms plumped the blackberries up and the bright sunshine made them sweeter every day. Thorny—yes. Sweet—not always. Worth the scratch of the thorns and the unexpected tartness of not-quite-ripe berries—of course. But I think we left most of them for the bears!



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What's Fresh Right Now?

- Beans—green, roma, yellow, cranberry
- Blackberries
- Blueberries
- Broccoli
- Cabbage—green/red head
- Carrots
- Chard—rainbow
- Citrus—juices, grapefruit, oranges
- Corn
- Cucumbers—mini seedless, kirby,
japanese/armenian slicers
- Eggplant—white/purple/green, thai
- Garlic—chives, elephant
- Greens—collards, callaloo, kale
- Herbs—oregano, rosemary, dill,
parsley, lime leaf, spearmint,
cilantro, chives, sage, basil
- Honey—orange blossom, gallberry,
tupelo, palmetto, wildflower
- Melons—cantaloupe, honeydew,
crenshaw, watermelon
- Microgreens
- Mushrooms—oyster
- Okra
- Onions—green/red scallions, red/yellow
- Peaches
- Peas—pink eye, white acre, zipper
- Peppers—green/red sweet bell, banana,
jalapeno, poblano, habanero,
hot/sweet banana, black beauty,
cherry bomb
- Potatoes—red, sweet, white
- Radish—globe, daikon
- Shoots—pea, sunflower, corn, spring mix
- Sprouts—alfalfa, clover, quinoa, wheat,
sunflower, garbanzo, mung bean,
french lentil, green lentil, radish
- Squash—pumpkin, yellow, spaghetti,
marrow, acorn, butternut,
buttercup, delicate, kabocha,
white turban
- Tomatoes—red beefsteak, grape, plum,
cherokee purple, gold medal
- Wheatgrass

Local and Fresh— Cranberry Beans

I was pleasantly surprised recently to find fresh cranberry beans grown by a local farmer. Known as shell beans in the Northeastern United States and borlotti in Italy, cranberry beans can be eaten fresh or dried for storage. Commonly found in San Francisco and New England markets, these beans are easily grown in North Central Florida, but this is the first time I have seen them here.

Cream-colored pods with streaks of crimson or burgundy, these beans are beautiful raw, but turn a dull brown color when cooked. The flavor is nutty, often compared to chestnuts. Despite their similar appearances, cranberry beans do not taste like pinto beans at all.

Look for fresh healthy pods. Shell the large pods and just snap the young ones. Cook in water to cover until tender. While they can be simply cooked in water and added to other dishes, if cooked with garlic, herbs and olive oil, they make a tasty entrée on their own.

In Italy, they are combined with pasta to create pasta fagioli—a wonderful rich soup/stew. To thicken the soup, cooks simply mash a few of the beans into the broth.

Cranberry Beans

INGREDIENTS

1 pound fresh cranberry beans
water to cover

DIRECTIONS

Rinse pods well. Shell the larger, older pods and snap the smaller, younger ones. (The immature beans are fine to eat as well.)

Place in a small lidded saucepan. Cover with an inch of water. Bring to a boil over high heat, reduce heat to low, cover and simmer until tender.

Use cooked beans in recipes or eat as is with a little olive oil and salt.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Stovetop Veggies with Coconut Milk Sauce

INGREDIENTS

3 Tablespoons olive oil
1 small shallot, chopped finely
1 Tablespoon grated fresh ginger
3 cups eggplant, peeled and chopped into 1 inch pieces
3 cups yellow squash, quartered lengthwise and chopped
2 cup carrots, peeled and sliced diagonally
1 Tablespoon lime peel, sliced finely
1-2 Tablespoons tamari or soy sauce
1 can light coconut milk
1-2 Tablespoons green thai curry paste
1 cup shelled beans or peas, cooked and drained
salt to taste
juice from 1/2 lime

DIRECTIONS

Heat oil in a large pot over medium heat. Cook shallot and ginger until tender, but not browned. Add eggplant, squash and carrots to pan, stir well and let sauté for 7-10 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Stir in lime peel, tamari, coconut milk, curry paste and cooked beans. Bring to a simmer and allow to cook, uncovered, until squash and carrots are cooked to desired doneness. Taste for seasoning and add salt as needed. Squeeze in lime juice, stir and serve with chutney.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Fresh Peach “Chutney”

INGREDIENTS

2 ripe peaches, peeled and diced
1 Tablespoon grated fresh ginger
1 teaspoon lime zest
1 Tablespoon marmalade
1 Tablespoon lime juice
pinch of cayenne pepper
dash of salt

DIRECTIONS

Mix together all ingredients. Allow to sit at room temperature for 30 minutes to blend flavors before serving.

Serve with curried dishes, on a sandwich or as part of a cheese board.

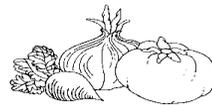
Tricks and Tips
Substitutions can get tricky in some recipes, but if the question is onions, scallions or shallots, the answer is an easy question—which do you prefer? While some people don't like onions, they can tolerate scallions or shallots due to their milder flavor. If the dish is cooked, raw onions will sweeten up while cooking. If the dish is raw and only a light onion flavor is desired, such as in salad dressings, try shallots for their mild flavor. The flavor of scallions or green onions can range from mild to wild, so their use depends on the recipe, your preference and the particular bunch of scallions you have. Taste your scallions first to determine if they are mild or spicy and use accordingly.

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Tricks and Tips

If you keep cookie dough in your freezer, fresh hot cookies are only a preheated oven away. Spoon cookie dough onto baking sheets (you don't have to allow room to spread), freeze, then remove frozen dough from sheets. Store in freezer in air-tight containers or doubled freezer bags. Follow baking directions, but allow an extra minute or two to bake.

Double Chocolate Chip Cookies

INGREDIENTS

- 2 sticks butter, softened
- 3/4 cup granulated sugar
- 1 cup light brown sugar, firmly packed
- 3 eggs, room temperature
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 2 cups whole wheat flour
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 2 - 12 ounce bags chocolate chips - I use Ghiradelli Semi-Sweet and 60% Cacao Bittersweet

DIRECTIONS

- Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line a cookie sheet with parchment paper.
- Beat together butter and sugars until light and creamy. Add eggs and vanilla and beat until smooth.
- Mix together flours, soda and salt. Stir into butter mixture and mix thoroughly. Add chocolate chips and stir well to distribute evenly.
- Scoop tablespoons of dough onto cookie sheet, leave room to spread. Bake 10 minutes, remove from oven, remove parchment from hot cookie sheet and place on counter. Allow to cool 5 minutes before removing from parchment. Leftover cookie dough may be refrigerated.