EDIBLE NUTS

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Illustrated by Lucile Walton

AUTUMN, all over the temperate regions of America, is essentially a season for harvesting. Most of the flowers are over. Now is the time for gathering fruits, berries and nuts, and either eating them on the spot or else preserving and storing them away for the winter. Members of the blackberry tribe usually ripen earlier in the summer although this year, owing to the cold spring, the blackberries were very late. In the mountains of the southwestern part of the state we were picking them into late August. Blueberries and huckleberries were ripening all through August and September. I must usually wait until October before picking the little wild grapes which grow along the river below our house and which make such delicious jelly. By November there is not much to do in the woods except to wait for the “pucker” to decrease in the persimmons, and to gather nuts, trying to beat the squirrels at their own work.

Wild nut gathering has changed radically in North America over the last century. Fifty years ago one of the main trees of mixed deciduous woods was the American chestnut, Castanea dentata, a member of the family Fagaceae which includes, as well as the chestnuts, the beeches and the many oaks. The chestnut was a large, rough-barked tree which could reach 90 feet in height. The leaves were pointed oblongs with serrations down the sides. The nuts, often two or three together, flattened on one or both sides, were contained in a prickly involucre known colloquially as the chestnut “bur”. Chestnuts formed an important food for the American Indian who either ate them as a vegetable, cooked them into his corn bread, or roasted them and used them to make a hot drink. Early American settlers used American chestnuts in many of the ways practiced in the Old World with Castanea sativa, a closely related species with a delicious nut. Using the ground-up nut as flour, bread and fritters can be made; the chestnuts can also be eaten as a vegetable or used with stewed meats. In my childhood home in England we always stuffed the Christmas turkey with chestnuts and crumbled up more, lightly boiled, chestnuts on the accom-
a single sweet nut, rounded rather than flattened like the American chestnut. The nuts ripen in late fall and are generally eaten raw. Miss Walton, who has drawn the pictures on these pages, describes the flavor as similar to that of a honeydew melon, not quite ripe. The American Indians made a sort of chocolate from chinquapins which was supposed to be “not much inferior to that made from cacao.” Chinquapins are not nearly as common as American chestnuts were in their heyday and are considered rather a rare treat amongst those who enjoy wild food.

Another tasty nut is the hazelnut, produced by two species of the genus Corylus belonging to the Corylaceae, the family which also includes the birches. Hazels are shrubs about 9 feet tall with thin tooted leaves, the nuts enclosed in leafy cups formed from much enlarged bracts. The nuts ripen in late fall and are really best eaten raw—just as nuts! Hazelnuts are found in the mountains around here but are commoner farther north. Their range extends from Georgia up into Canada, west to Saskatchewan in the north and Oklahoma and Missouri further south. The Greek word corys means helmet, and the generic name refers to the shape of the nuts’ covering.

Walnuts, butternuts (or white walnuts) and hickory nuts all belong to the walnut family or Juglandaceae and all are edible. The walnuts are distinguished from the hickories by the seamless husk which covers the nut and does not crack away from the mature nut. The husk of hickories when mature cracks into four valves exposing the smooth-shelled nut. Confusingly, Carya, the generic name for hickories, is the Greek word for walnut, while Juglans, the generic name for walnut, comes from Jovis glans, the nut of Jupiter. The fruit of the butternut, Juglans cinerea, is elongate and the husk is covered with short, sticky hairs. The black walnut, Juglans nigra, is round and smooth.

Nuts of this family can all be eaten raw or ground up and used in bread and cake, but the Indians also used them in many other ways. In particular, they extracted oil from them by pounding them up (shells and all) and boiling the pieces. The oil skimmed from the surface was spread like butter on bread and vegetables, preserved for future times, or even used as hair oil. The next layer to be skimmed off after the oil contained the nut meats, which could either be used immediately or dried into hard cakes and stored for the winter. The shells remained at the bottom of the boiling vessel and were discarded.

Young black walnuts can be pickled, husks and all, a practice dating back to colonial times and probably introduced from England, where in some places pickled walnuts are still popular. The juice of walnut husks stains fingers and clothes indelibly. Hardened walnut users do not attempt to remove the husks by hand but leave the walnuts in a large damp pile until the husks rot off them naturally. Another solution is to spread the walnuts across your driveway and drive over them every time you take the car out. Those who enjoy Gilbert and Sullivan’s light operas will remember that one of the Mikado’s efforts to “make the punishment fit the crime” was to take the lady who used makeup too freely and treat her with “permanent walnut juice.”

The hickories fall into three main groups. The familiar pecan is a tree almost exclusively of the Deep South and has a nut which is sold commercially everywhere. The bitternuts or pignuts are often as bitter as the name suggests. Finally, the sweet hickories, including the shell-bark or shag-bark and the mockernut, all have delicious nuts. I make a solid fruity bread

from the persimmons which grow round us, and in it I like to put nuts from the Carya tomentosa or mockernut which grows on the old family graveyard of our house. However, it does take a long time to crack and extract enough, and often the squirrels have beaten me to the crop, so that I have to go to the store and tamely buy my nuts.

These are only a few of the palatable nuts which can be found in the woods towards the end of the year. It takes real dedication to seek out and prepare attractively all the things which really enthusiastic wild food gatherers say you can eat. But for those of us who wander about in the late fall woods with just a casual eye open for edibles, chinquapins, hazelnuts and members of the walnut family make a very good beginning.