FROM time to time over the past four years, I have referred to the edibility of some of the plants I was describing, and many readers have written to ask for my recipes. I thought, therefore, it might be appropriate to talk here about ways of preparing some wild food. I shall only describe methods which I have tried myself and served frequently.

Easily heading the list of requests were those for my persimmon bread recipe, and I am very happy to talk about this since it is a great favorite in our household too. Also, I had to learn a great deal about persimmons. Coming from a foreign country, I did not grow up with the folklore which surrounds persimmons, but I soon learned it. I was told that just when persimmons looked their juiciest, the flesh was extremely "puckery" to taste—true—very true, and that to harvest persimmons it was necessary to wait until after the first frost which eradicated the pucker—not necessarily true. The farmland around us in Albemarle County has many groups of persimmon trees (*Diospyros virginiana* L., belonging to the ebony family) which bear heavily in late fall. It seemed a pity to waste the crop. I tried to approach the problem scientifically. First I left the persimmons on the trees until after the first frost. Then I went out, only to find that almost the entire crop had fallen off and lay rotting on the ground below. I tried one of the few that remained on a tree—still puckery. The following year I gathered the fruit while it was still on the tree—very puckery. The pulp is easy to obtain by pushing the fruit through a rotary food mill, without any cooking. I put some of the pulp in the deep freezer. After a week of artificial frost, I thawed it and tasted—still puckery. I left some of the pulp around the kitchen to age more naturally. After two weeks it had grown a rich coating of mold. I scraped off the mold and reached for the orange pulp beneath—still puckery. In despair I took all the available pulp, puckery as it was, dumped it into a batch of persimmon bread and threw it into the oven. With bated breath I carved the first slice of the result. Hurray! It was delicious, with not a trace of pucker.

So now at last I know what to do with persimmons, and the procedure is routine in my household. The fruit is picked straight from the tree in late fall or early winter when it is somewhat wrinkled and withered-looking, but still juicy, and pulped immediately. If not used at once, the pulp can be deep frozen just as it is.

The batter for the bread is very easy. A cup of sugar (brown or white) is creamed together with six ounces margarine. Two eggs are beaten in and then two cups of flour and one teaspoonful of soda added. Finally, at least one generous cup of persimmon pulp (more is acceptable) is stirred in. The mixture is spread into two one-pound loaf pans lined with wax paper and baked for one hour at 325°. The pulp darkens on heating so the result is deep brown loaves from which the wax paper can be peeled while they are still quite warm. When cold they can be thinly sliced and spread lightly with butter, to the great enjoyment of anyone present. The recipe can be doubled and the extra loaves stored in the freezer without impairment. Chopped nuts can be added to the bread, but I am lazy about shelling our own hickories, and it seems almost cheating to buy walnuts at the store. Besides, we like it just as it is.

I always feel that September ought to be the blackberry month because it is in England. However, in Virginia they are pretty well over by August. But with all the rain this year it was possible to freeze plenty for use later. We also had a huge crop of June apples so there was ample opportunity for deep dish blackberry and apple pie. But the best thing of all to do with blackberries is to make homemade blackberry ice cream in a proper old-fashioned ice cream freezer. I make the blackberry syrup out of a quart of berries with about 3/4 cup of water. This is stewed together for a few minutes and then "mercilessly flogged" (a cooking term I always enjoy!) through a sieve so that much of the pulp goes through, but the seeds do not. Not being a complete purist, I add at this point (while the syrup is still hot) an envelope of soaked gelatin, the juice of half a lemon, and a cupful of sugar. I am particular about using real cream and not evaporated milk, and when the syrup is cool I add a cup of heavy cream (if possible a cup of light cream too) and then freeze the whole lot in the ice cream freezer. The recipe can also be used for dewberries, black raspberries and wild grapes. Although I am a great devotee of the deep freezer, I think that there are two things which really are better if not kept frozen for too long, and one is fresh fruit ice cream. The other is fish. The small bass
and bluegills which we catch out of a nearby pond form some of our staple food during the summertime, and we try to eat them as soon as possible after catching.

Wild vegetables are harder to find at the end of the summer, and besides, this is a time when one’s own cultivated vegetable garden is burgeoning with good things. But in the early part of the year wild greens can be a fine addition to one’s table. We are very fond of Dry Land Cress, sometimes known as Winter Cress, Mustard Greens or Yellow Rocket. There are two species of *Barbarea* (belonging to the Cruciferae) which are commonly eaten as land cress, *Barbarea vulgaris* and *B. verna*. When a farmer’s wife here first pointed out cress to me (“creases,” she called it), she showed me two distinct leaf forms and said that one was delicious and the other was called “bull sallitt” and was very bitter. I have since tried both forms, boiling them in two lots of water to reduce any bitterness, and they are both delicious. I am inclined to think any member of the genus is probably palatable. The genus is called after St. Barbara, either because the seeds had to be planted on St. Barbara’s Day, in early December, or because there was nothing else to harvest at that time. Round here it can be found as early as February, the only bright green clumps in a sea of winter dullness, and it forms a very tasty colorful vegetable that almost everyone enjoys.

We are not obessional about wild food. We do not, like a Washington friend, have *Phytolacca* roots growing in our basement in order to enjoy the shoots year round. But we do like an occasional spring dish of what is called locally “poke sallitt.” Pokeweed shoots must be picked very young when they are scarcely above ground, and boiled in two lots of water. They are good, but by the time they are too high in the wild to eat, it is time anyway to be turning to other things.

By this time the summer is on the wane, and the blackberries, dewberries and black raspberries are in, it is time to go out with the blueberry pot. And if it is a good year for blueberries, who cares about any of the rigors that winter may bring?

Illustration by Lucile Walton

Blackberries