



Convenience foods, all-year-round imports in the supermarkets and just plain ignorance have denied many people one of my boy-hood pleasures – harvesting the fruit of the countryside.

How many people still go black-berrying along the country lanes? Delicious on their own and a wonderful addition to stewed apple, they might not all be big and juicy but that's half the fun – finding the “king” berries at the tips of the clusters or the bush that has extra succulent ones. Spread by birds and a haven for other wildlife, we have several bramble patches on our site – favourite places for butterflies and for a snack when I'm doing my surveys!

What is more, blackberries are a rich source of antioxidants that neutralise free radical damage and so help fight the effects of ageing – they are also thought to fight cancer, heart disease and Alzheimer's. They rank with cranberries and blueberries near the top of the list for antioxidant concentrations as well as antioxidant capacity, they are much tastier and they are free!

Blackberries are best eaten straight from the bush when they are soft enough to just fall into your hand - they don't improve with keeping. But be sure to pick them before the 10th of October, local legend has it that after that date the Devil spits on them and you don't want to be eating Devil-spit do you?



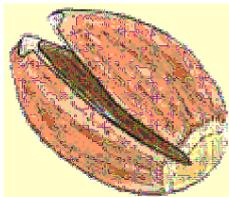
Along the south perimeter of our site we planted several wild cherry trees that are now mature and fruiting well. The genetic parent of all sweet domestic cherries, the Gean or Wild Cherry is small and tart, with an overly large stone for its size, but still worth a try when fully ripe (almost black).

There's one of these trees on site that has good-eating sweet cherries, so you never know your luck, good hunting!

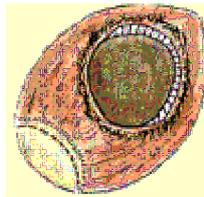


Hazelnuts are another boy-hood treat – I had better teeth in those days and cracked many a nut with no thought for fillings and crowns! We have some in our shrub belts but there are many more in the surrounding hedges.

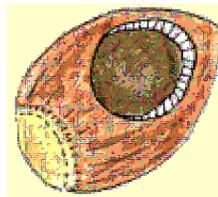
These nuts are also a favourite with our small mammals and you can tell who has been around by what they leave: If you think you've found evidence of dormice, please let me know, they are rare and protected.



Squirrel



Woodmouse



Bankvole



Dormouse

The last of my “foods for free” is the Sloe, bitter fruit of the blackthorn, extensively planted on site as screening in the shrub belts and found in most country lanes but beware, good sloe bushes are a treasure and may be guarded!

This is my Grandmother's recipe:

Ingredients:

1lb. Sloes picked after the first frost, 1lb. Sugar, cheap Gin, Vodka or other spirit.

The blue/black fruits with a plum-like stone follow the white flowers of spring, they are quite inedible but are an essential ingredient of sloe gin.



Directions:

If the skins are not soft, prick them with a needle to allow the juices to escape.

Mix sugar & sloes & half fill a bottle with the mixture; fill the bottle with spirits.

Store for two months, turning or shaking occasionally to ensure the contents mix well and the sugar dissolves.

Best drunk on Christmas Eve – and a Merry Christmas to you all!

Dr Owen K. Wilby