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The Cookbook Section

Many of the plants described in this book can be prepared in a variety of ways, and many of these ways are pretty simple. Some may be used in salads or sprinkled on scrambled eggs, while others may be made into syrup, jam, and jelly.

If you know how to make pancakes, for example, then adding some wild plant material to the batter will not require a recipe. You will find such casual uses recommended in the individual plant descriptions.

A number of wild plants, however, can be used in more elaborate ways, with specific recipes and directions. That's what you'll find in this section: detailed directions for making jelly, teas, wine and beer, cake, candy, soups, and more.

Sometimes, recipes involving wild edibles don't provide exact amounts and measurements. Instead, bring your established cooking knowledge to the new recipes and then experiment. Sample as you go to suit the recipe to your taste. And get ready to be wowed by the diversity of flavors that wild edibles can bring to the table.

How to Make Jams, Jellies, and Preserves

Jams and jellies can be made from many wild fruits and berries. Pectin is what makes them jell. It's a water-soluble substance found naturally in plant tissues that binds cell walls together. Some fruits, such as apples and citrus, contain the pectin needed to make them jell, but most fruits and berries need commercial pectin. Without it, you get syrup.

To eliminate the need for commercial pectin, the juice of one or two apples can be boiled with the chosen fruit or a quarter cup of lemon juice can be added.

You'll find recipes for jams and jellies included with my descriptions of certain plants, including how much fruit to use, how much water to cook them in, and how long to boil them.

Certain steps, though, are the same for every jam and jelly. First, wash the fruit of dust and any unwanted critters, pick off stems, take out sticks and leaves, and remove any dried up, moldy, or spoiled fruits.

Cook the fruit in an enamel or stainless steel pan, mashing the fruit with a potato masher as it softens. Some people avoid aluminum cookware because of reported health risks.

To make jelly, pour the liquid fruit mixture into a jelly bag, which can be a couple of layers of cheesecloth, a pillowcase, or an old tea towel. Tie the edges together with string and hang the "bag" from a cabinet handle over a large bowl. You can also place the jelly cloth and fruit inside a colander positioned over a large bowl. Let the juice drip through and into the bowl overnight.

To make jam, run the cooked fruit and water through a food mill to remove skins and seeds or mash it through a strainer or colander. This will yield a puree. Or let it drip overnight as for jelly, but squeeze the bag the next day to push the pulp through.

The resulting juice (for jelly) or puree (for jam) can be stored in the refrigerator for several days or frozen for later use.

To prepare for jelly making, wash the jelly jars and sterilize them in boiling water for 10 minutes. Add the lids to the water after turning the heat off. Keep jars and lids in the hot water until you're ready to fill them. Then empty them and set them upright.

Always make jelly and jam in small batches—no more than 4 or, at most, 6 cups at a time—because pectin loses its ability to jell the juice if it takes too long to bring it to a boil.

Use a large, 1- to 2-gallon kettle, because the juice and sugar foams up high. Put in the amount of juice called for in the recipe for that particular fruit. Bring it to a boil, stir in a box of commercial pectin, and return the mixture to a full rolling boil that cannot be stirred down, stirring constantly. Quickly add in the measured sugar, bring it to a hard boil again, and boil for exactly one minute, stirring constantly after adding the sugar to prevent burning.

Remove the kettle from the heat and skim off any foam. Pour or ladle the juice into the hot, sterilized jars. Wipe any drips from the rims of the jars, set the metal lids on carefully, and screw down the bands tightly. Don't move the jars for a few hours to let the jelly set. The small round buttons in the middles of the lids will pop down (audibly) when the vacuum seals them. When cool, store them in a dark place. If any lids do not pop down, store them in the refrigerator and use them first.

Beautyberry Jelly

1½ quarts of beautyberries
2 quarts of water
4½ cups of sugar
1 box commercial pectin

Boil the beautyberries and water for 20 minutes and hang up in a jelly bag to drip. Then, using 3 cups of resulting juice and sugar, follow the directions above for making jams and jellies, adding commercial pectin. Remove from heat and pour into sterilized jars. (Alternatively, you can use 3 cups of beautyberry juice plus ½ cup of lemon juice and 5 cups of sugar, omitting the commercial pectin.)

Blackberry Jam

8 cups of blackberries
¼ cup water
1 box commercial pectin
7 cups sugar

Cook and mash the berries in water. For a smoother jam, push the cooked fruit through a sieve to remove some of the seeds. Bring 5 cups of the puree to a boil, add pectin, bring to a rolling boil again, stir in sugar, and boil hard one minute. Pour into hot jars and cap.