WILD SUMMER FRUITS

by Fergus Drennan, Professional Forager

July and August between them offer up a wealth of wild and 'wild' fruit for the seasonally responsive forager. 'Wild' fruit here simply means the fruit of plants deliberately grown – generally, in gardens and public places, but rarely foraged or considered as food - all fair game, in my opinion, given the relevant permission (ish)!

Roughly in order of appearance, these collectively include: Mahonia and Darwin's Barberry, redcurrants, blackberries, raspberries, elderberries, wild strawberries, wild cherries, staghorn sumac berries, figs, mulberries, cherry plums, Japanese rose (hips), haws, dog rose (hips), goji berries, bilberries, sea buckthorn berries, sloes and rowan berries – to give a by no means exhaustive list. These are just the summer fruits I pick regularly each year. Nevertheless, looking back through my photographic database of the past 4 years, I was surprised to see really significant variation in fruiting time, from year to year, 2-3 weeks, typically, and a month for mulberries.

I live in the South-East and can almost always harvest good sloes for gin and sea buckthorn berries for sorbet, at the end of August. Nevertheless, for these and all other fruits mentioned, the season will be up to three weeks later, the further north you're located.

For fairly accurate UK distribution maps, visit the National Biodiversity Network database: www.searchnbn.net/index_homepage/index.jsp

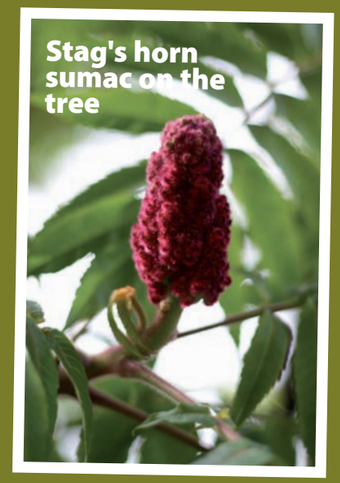
Given such variation, rather than introduce these according to order of ripening, I'm going to do so, vaguely (There's much overlap.) by location or habitat, the biggest distinction here being between urban and rural situations. Let's begin with an urban forage around town.

Fruits of the urban forage

Berries of Mahonia species and Darwin's Barberry (Berberis darwinii) are both found in considerable quantities on these evergreen shrubs, commonly grown as garden or landscaping plants in public places. They are also the earliest summer fruit - Mahonia in June, B.darwinii in July. Both can be eaten raw or cooked, the seeds being swallowed whole or spat out. The former is rather bitter, the latter berry more sour. Both work in mixed jams and alcoholic cocktails; however, for me their main use derives from the superb yeast blooms on their skins. These are excellent for generating yeast cultures for wild wine-making or speeding up or invigorating a sourdough mix.

Mulberries, both black (Morus nigra) and white (M.alba) can frequently be found in parks and gardens – especially the black ones. The fully ripened black variety (late July-August) can be used in any way you might use blackberries; of course, they have their own delicious and distinct flavour. The best thing is to just gorge straight from the tree; don't wear white clothing, though! If planning to use/process immediately, laying out a large sheet on the ground and climbing the tree to shake the branches is an excellent collection method. White mulberries, neither as juicy nor as flavoursome as the black variety, are sweet and very good dried to concentrate that sweetness.

Staghorn Sumac (Rhus typhina) belongs to the Cashew or Anacardiaceae family, as do Poison Sumac and Poison Ivy. Not to worry, though, as these look very different – especially, when considering the fruit. Although not wild plants, sumac berries can occasionally be gathered from naturalized shrubs found on waste ground and by river banks. Nevertheless, wherever it grows it is worth foraging. Such foraging usually involves knocking on people's doors when you've spotted the shrub in their garden. Indeed, once you become familiar with this attractive plant you'll start to notice it everywhere. The autumn colour of the plant's leaves provides a stunning show of yellow through to vivid orange and red before falling to leave wine-red upwards-pointing cones, like dense clusters of small hairy berries. These berry clusters, once ripe and fully formed in mid - late August, remain in place all through the winter, even occasionally persisting through to the following August when the new clusters are almost ripe; even such old clusters can successfully be used for tea, provided their colour is not washed out. Nevertheless, ideally, the berry clusters are best collected from late August until October, used immediately or dried for later use. For a pinkish lemon juice substitute, mash the berries in COLD water, strain and add more berries, repeating (once there is sufficient for lemonade) until desired acidity is achieved. (Add sugar and chill for a lemonade-style drink – popular in the States.) It may be possible to use R typhina the way the related R. coriaria is used in Turkey and Iran, as a condiment, sprinkled on kebabs, or cooked with water to a thick sour paste, added to meat and vegetable dishes, as is done in Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt. Be aware, though, that some people are allergic to edible parts of cashew family plants; also, the very fine-haired berries can lead to itching in a few people.



Recipe : Sumac Tea

Serves 1 Preparation time: 5 mins
1 large berry cluster
½ pt-ish spring water
1-3 dessertspoons sugar

Remove berries from all woody stems; place in a pan and pour on boiled water. Squash with a potato masher for 1 minute (if berries collected Aug-Oct) or ONLY 10 seconds if collected from Nov-June (to prevent its becoming too tannic). Strain, sweeten and reheat. Alternatively, cold extract and reheat – but you won't get the mild tannic astringency that I prefer.

Figs (Ficus carica) have long been cultivated in Britain and can be found naturalized in some places. The fruit can ripen either in July/August or in October and can be huge. If you miss the ripe fruit, the hard green fruit left is excellent candied or turned into jam. Nevertheless, ripe or not, be careful of the white milky latex that causes contact dermatitis in some

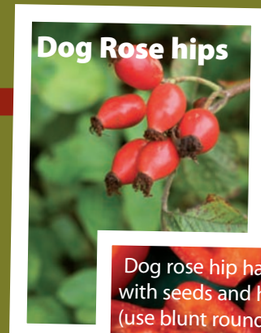
people.

Town and country forageables

Some fruit are just as likely to be found in towns and cities as in more remote and wild areas. Here are 5 of my favourites – all very common.

Japanese Rose (Rosa rugosa) hips look somewhat like squashed tomatoes. The thorny shrub is often planted in parks, gardens and public places but is widely naturalized – especially in some coastal habitats. Ripening in July and August, up to a month before the fruit of the common dog rose, they are also more fleshy and succulent. Excellent for syrups but also good raw in desserts or salads. Use a very sharp knife to peel the skin and flesh away from the hairy seeds for use.


Japanese Rose hips


Dog Rose hips

Dog Rose (Rosa canina) is found on waste ground, hedgerows, and woodland edges, the ripe berries being gathered from late August through to February (in some years). Use for syrups, soups, sorbets, tisane and wine, after removing the hairy seeds - to put down people's backs as 'itching powder'. Did you do that at school?


Dog rose hip halved with seeds and hairs removed (use blunt rounded knife tip under running water)

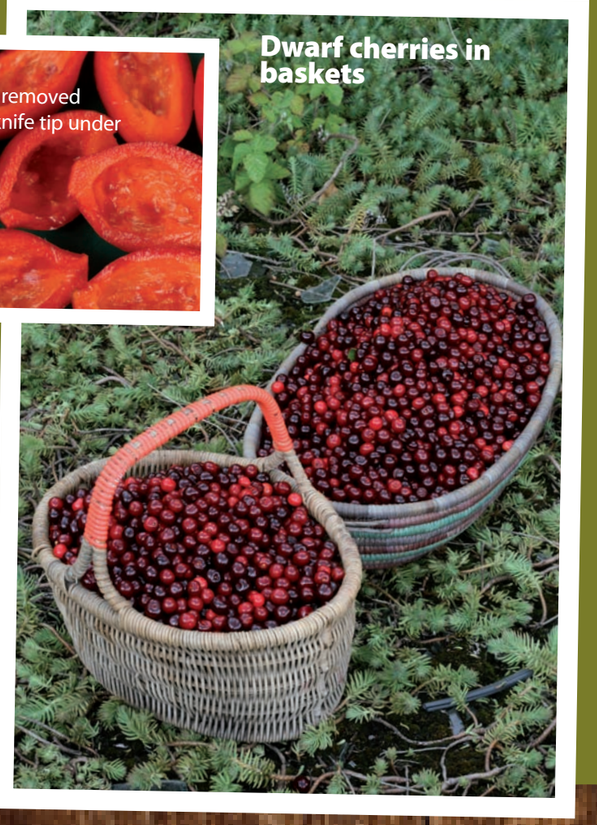
Wild Cherry or Gean trees (Prunus avium) can be found throughout the UK - large mature trees in woodland and at woodland edges, smaller more densely fruit-laden trees in hedgerows, on waste ground, near railway lines and grassy coastal areas. In the latter habitats, the trees are just as, if not more, likely to be Dwarf or Sour Cherry (Prunus cerasus) – growing up to about 8 foot high. Both of these varieties produce fruit, growing on long individual stalks, singularly or in small clusters. These range in colour from blushed yellow (rarely) to red and dark purplish black – especially when fully ripe. The fruits of both varieties ripen from early July to late August and are fantastic raw or cooked, especially, if you value a delightful balance of sweetness and acidity in your fruit.

Cherry Plum (Prunus cerasifera)

Varying in colour from a deep uniform blackish-purple or blood-red to canary yellow and various colour combinations in between, cherry plums can be found ripe and ripening from mid-July until September. They are usually about the size of a cherry tomato but can be considerably larger. Some have a rich plum flavour whilst others are succulent and refreshing to eat but somewhat tasteless. The best way to find out is to try one straight from the tree. In fact, eating them that way is one of the best ways to use them and, of course, is certainly the simplest.


Mixed cherry plums and a couple of greengages

Although not strictly a wild food, as many are planted in parks and gardens, trees are frequently encountered in hedgerows, by roads and along footpaths in public places (especially the purplish-red leaved and fruited variety) where, indeed, other Prunus species such as damsons and wild cherries can be found. Apart from eating them raw, stewing them with a little water and sugar is great, especially chilled and served with natural yoghurt. Of course, they lend themselves to the making of jam, chutney, wine and cordials, as well as being a tasty addition to fruit pies.


Dwarf cherries in baskets

Blackberry (Rubus fruticosus spp), widespread in woodland, hedgerows and waste ground, needs no introduction. Suffice to say, the sweetest and juiciest ones are those ripening first at the terminal end of the berry cluster (July – even June occasionally) in sunnier situations. Large green or red, unripe pre- or post-season berries are great for candying.


Summer's first blackberry harvest

Rowan or Mountain Ash (Sorbus aucuparia) is a small native deciduous tree, widespread throughout the UK, also often planted in parks and urban streets. The sharp-tasting berries are toxic raw but the juice makes a fine jelly, especially when combined with crab-apples and haws.


Ripe rowan berries on the tree

Elderberry (Sambucus nigra) can be found on waste ground, woodland edges, hedgerows, roadsides, parks and gardens. The ripe berries are excellent for wine- making and to prevent colds. I can drink buckets of the juice raw but some people are sensitive to it, even a small glass leading to vomiting and gastric problems. So, boil first or be sure to test your sensitivity with small quantities of fruit or juice before using raw.


Elderberry

Fruit leathers

Most of these fruits are excellent cooked in a little sugar syrup and turned into a mixed fruit billy-can-made (if camping) summer pudding. Line with day-old bread; weigh down to compress; leave overnight and turn out. For longer-term storage, jams or fruit, leathers are a great option.

Fruit leathers can be raw or cooked. Raw: Separate fruit juice and pulp from stones/pips/seeds by mashing and pressing through a sieve. Combine with powdered nuts and add spices, if desired. Spread thinly on non-stick sheets (Clingfilm works, just about.) and place in a low oven or food dehydrator at around 55 °C and leave overnight or until it pulls cleanly away from the surface, in one piece. Alternatively, place a thin layer in a metal tray; cover tightly with fine black muslin and leave in 30°C + sun for 2 days. Cooked: Crush fruit and squeeze out juice. Pillow cases work well for this. Boil in a pan to reduce down to ¼ of initial volume; combine with extracted pulp and continue as for raw method.

Plants found in more wild places.

Redcurrant (Ribes rubrum) is a native plant found, occasionally, growing in large quantities in old deciduous woodland, especially near streams.


woodland red currants

Wild strawberry (Fragaria vesca) can sometimes cover large areas of chalky down land, smaller quantities being found along woodland paths, hedge banks and roadsides. Great flavour but hard to collect in large quantities. On down land near towns, flocks of pigeons often feast on them first. Note that the terminal leaf tooth protrudes beyond the tooth on either side, unlike in the otherwise very similar-looking, barren strawberry plant.

Hawthorn (Crataegus monogyna) is a common hedgerow species and boundary-marker found throughout the UK. The spring leaves are good for salad and tea, blossoms for tea, syrups and wine, berries for tea, jellies, wine, and jam, seeds roasted for an adequate coffee substitute (best in a mix). Hawthorn, generally, is a wonderful natural heart tonic with no adverse contra indications; its blossoms, associated with the wild-hearted and abandoned revelries of Beltane and spring love, compositionally embody the very smell of sex (triethylamine) according to Richard Mabey in his wonderful Flora Britannica. However, focusing on just the berries, these can be harvested from mid-August in the South but are easier to work with throughout September when they are softer. They can be added, whole, to brandy, pulped and used like apple sauce, dried and ground into a flour or used to make jellies. I like to cook them with dwarf quinces to make jelly. Nevertheless, because they are high in pectin the pulped raw flesh will set within 30 minutes without further processing, hence the recipe below. If used in this way the seeds can be saved and roasted as a coffee substitute. Midland hawthorn (C.laevigata) and other Crataegus species can be used in similar ways.