

Annals of the Wild Life Reserve

The Writings of Eloise Butler



Children's Forage Plants in the Wild Garden - Jan 1915

I have been thinking lately about the plants I used to browse upon when I was a child and am trying to persuade my sister to write a paper on the subject. I wonder if any of you can add to the list from your own experience.

I ate but little at the table when beech leaves were young and tender. I do not know how delectable their acid would seem now, for I have but one small beech in the garden and no leaves to spare for experiments. The beech barely reaches the eastern border of Minnesota. The white starchy bud of the Interrupted Fern was a delicious morsel well worth long and hard digging to procure. It has a taste peculiar to itself and I think it would make an excellent salad. [See note below] We used to dig industriously also for the tubers of Dwarf Ginseng (*Panax trifolium*); ground nuts we called them. Do they have the same properties as commercial ginseng? I have naturalized them in the garden from tubers sent me from Maine. It bloomed for me May 22. After fruiting it dies to the ground. We nibbled quantities of the nutlets of Sweet Fern, *Myrica asplenifolia*. [*Comptonia peregrina* - photo right] Boys made cigarettes of the leaves. It wasn't fashionable in our set for girls to smoke. I have failed to induce this plant to grow, although I try every season. I have succeeded with *Myrica gale*, another fragrant plant of the genus. I have never tested the edibility of its fruits. It loves water, while sweet fern affects a gravelly soil.



Young shoots of raspberry and blackberry, peeled of their prickles, and the tips of wild grape tendrils were good fodder, too. The common red raspberry is in excess in the Garden. It is uprooted when I want room for something else. I discovered only last summer a few roots of the Thimbleberry, *Rubus occidentalis*. [Garden Log July 11, 1914. We now call it Black Raspberry.] The stems are covered with thick white bloom. In Maine, everyone is fond of the young leaves of ivory plums, *Gaultheria procumbens*. We called them "youngsters," and the spicy fruit, "boxberries." Another name for the leaves was "ivries," the meaning of which is not apparent to me. The inner bark of Slippery Elm and of Sweet Birch, *Betula lenta*, were especially esteemed - the latter not a native of Minnesota.

The spore capsules of the moss, called "pigeon wheat," *Polytrichum*, were culled for their slightly acid taste; but for extreme tartness, leaves of Sheep Sorrel were resorted to, which caused a peculiar sensation in the hinges of the jaw most often employed with the product of the spruces. Spearmint and Pennyroyal supplied aromatic flavors, also bits of Sarsaparilla, *Aralia nudicaulis*; and Sweet Flag,

Acorus calamus. In Minneapolis, children also eat the berries of common sumach, *Rhus typhina* [*Rhus*

hirta - photo above]; and the roots of Sweet Cicely, *Osmorhiza* [*Osmorhiza*]. Of course, all sorts of berries were eaten - sweet or otherwise, puckery, juicy or stony.

Besides those mentioned above, Bunchberries, *Cornus canadensis*; and snake berries (rare in Minneapolis) - a local name for Partridge Berries - *Mitchella repens*, Creeping Snowberry, concealed on the under surface of the delicate vine, were special favorites, notwithstanding the "horrid smart-bug" that was often popped into the mouth along with the sweet Bunchberries. Thorn apples and bird cherries, nearly all stone, were made to yield their pulp. Chokecherries were devoured to the right degree of puckermert for "papa, prunes, and prisms."

Other edible fruits in the wild garden are chokeberry, blackberry, dewberry, two species of Juneberry, two species of strawberry, flowering raspberry (rather tasteless), salmon berry, wild crab, the two cranberries, sheep berry, high-bush cranberry, may apple, blueberry, huckleberry, highbush blueberry, two species of gooseberry, three of currant, purple-berried elder, wild crab, black cherry, Bessy's cherry, and sand cherry, *Prunus pumila*.

Of nuts, there are only hazel - two species. Other nut bearers are introduced, but not old enough to fruit.

To Mrs. Holtzoff's list of substitutes for tea, I can add *Amorpha canescens* [Leadplant - photo right]. It is used for the sake of economy by some western farmers.



A German lady comes to the garden for *Galium circaezans* [Licorice Bedstraw] which she uses as a flavoring for Rhine wine and lemonade.

Note: Many of the plants mentioned in this article have an information sheet, with photos and descriptions, posted on this website in archive section with the links: Common Name List - Scientific Name List.

Note: The fiddleheads of Interrupted fern (and all *Osmundas*) are now known to be carcinogenic.

The opening and closing text of this essay indicates that this article was sent to the Gray Memorial Botanical Chapter, division D, of the Agassiz Association for publication in the Group's circular bulletin. Eloise was a member of Division D (the middle west) from 1908 until her death. Those bulletins were circulated among members by postal round-robin circulation. The Agassiz Association was founded in the late 1800's to be an association of local chapters that would combine the like interests of individuals and organizations in the study of nature but after 1901 was largely defunct and only the Gray Memorial Botanical Chapter, with its several divisions, was still active and remained so until 1943. The Wild Botanic Garden in Wirth Park, became the "Native Plant Reserve" and was then renamed the Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden in 1929.

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