

THE FORAGER

BY AMY CROWELL

EAT WILD



As a forager, I hunt and eat wild foods that grow in my immediate area. It's as close to eating locally as you can get. I may put in hours of work for a tiny harvest, but our nutritious and delicious local delicacies are worth it.

A few days ago, I strapped my baby on my back and set out on along the greenbelt, where I noticed many tiny, hard green fruits that will be ripe by the time you read this. Late spring and early summer are prime time for berries of all kinds.

But before you set out on your treasure hunt, consider Foraging 101:

1. Wear long pants and bring bug repellent.
2. Know how to identify poison ivy.
3. Get permission to harvest, either from the private landowner or the land manager of a public space. Park lands and greenbelts are usually legal for foraging, but look for signs with information about endangered plants, and, when in doubt, ask.
4. Harvest only what you need to ensure a good harvest next year.
5. Make absolutely sure you know what you're picking. Our area has more than its share of poisonous plants out there. A guidebook with pictures, such as Delena Tull's *A Practical Guide: Edible and Useful Plants of Texas and the Southwest* (University of Texas Press), is essential.

Here are some berries to seek out this spring and summer:

Agarita (*Berberis trifoliolata*)—My German-Alsatian ancestors made wine out of anything they could find growing in the South Texas brush country, including the sweet red berries of the agarita (also known as agarito or algerita). These evergreen shrubs produce fragrant yellow blooms in early spring that eventually turn to perfectly sweet berries with a hint of a candy-sour taste in May and June. You can eat them raw or harvest them for jellies and pies, but watch out for the prickly, holly-like leaves. To harvest large quantities, spread a sheet under the plant and gently shake its limbs so that the ripe berries fall to the sheet below.

Mulberries (*Morus spp.*)—A few different species grow in Austin. All produce edible, pinkish-red berries that resemble small, elongated blackberries and ripen to a deep purple in May and June. A few years ago I picked enough from one stand of trees to fill a five-gallon bucket. Look for them also near fence lines and stream banks. Note: Paper mulberries are not true mulberries and do not have edible fruit. See my recipe for *Mulberry Sorbet* at edibleaustin.com.

WILD GREEN GRAPE PIE

My husband and I made several of these green grape pies together for a community-garden fund raiser. We barely knew each other at the time, but ended up being so interested in each other that we forgot to strain out the hard grape seeds from the pie filling.

- 3 c. mustang grapes, picked small and green, with soft seeds (if using green grapes with hard seeds, strain)
- 1 c. sugar
- 1 c. water
- 1 T. cornstarch
- 4 T. butter
- Dash of salt
- Pastry for 1 pie

Combine grapes, sugar and water and boil until the skins are soft and the grapes are squishy. Remove from heat and add cornstarch, butter and a dash of salt. Pour into the unbaked pie crust (using a top crust is optional) and bake at 375° for 40-50 minutes. When baking, you may need to cover the crust with foil for half the time to make sure it doesn't burn.



Dewberries (*Rubus trivialis*)—If you pay attention to what grows on medians, slopes and steep hillsides in spring, you'll notice the dewberry's low-growing, thorny vines and billowy white flowers. Like mulberries, dewberries grow best on edges and in disturbed soil, especially near water. Prepare to brave fire ants, poison ivy, chiggers and thorns in exchange for a real treat, either eaten raw or made into jams and pies. And remember, the dewberries that creep closest to the ground are the sweetest.

Elderberries (*Sambucus canadensis*)—these somewhat elusive fruits are a rare delicacy that can be turned into uniquely sweet and earthy-tasting wines and jellies. They're worth the hunt. Found along creeks and waterways, the tiny elderberries are clustered at the top of the plants. Eating too many raw berries raw can upset the stomach, and the leaves, roots, and twigs are mildly toxic.

Mustang grapes (*Vitis mustangensis*)—This essential ingredient of green-grape pie may be the most common species of grape in our area. Fruits are easily distinguished by their cupped, furry leaves, as well as by clusters that aren't as tightly packed as other grapes. But the labor is worth the reward—succulent pies in July and August. Wear gloves when picking these extremely acidic grapes.