

EDIBLE PLANTS AND LICHENS

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

I can't remember what we've said about capturing small game—rabbits, spruce hens, and so forth. I think they're important basic foods that you can get off the land.

My main experience with that as a child was helping my parents pick wild berries and so forth. In Alaska the main berries that we picked were cranberries and blueberries. I usually tried to put up eleven gallons of some kind of berries. I'm not sure now, but I think that came out to something like half a cup a day.

Blueberries

In some years blueberries were so scarce that they weren't worth bothering with, so whenever we had a good year and could get berries, we tried to put up extra.

As for blueberries, you and Sasha have a very good idea about that, I guess—putting them in quart jars with sugar and keeping them in a cold hole. I usually got five gallons or so, whenever the berries were good. With a spruce root dipper and a good basket, it doesn't take long to gather five gallons of berries when the picking is good.



A spruce root berry beater propels blueberries into a waiting basket. Leaves and twigs will be removed later by winnowing in a breezy spot.

Image:

I usually mash those berries up. I use a stick that has a foot on it to keep them mashed as I add them. That helps control mold.

Sometimes I'll keep a five gallon container in the house and let them ferment and turn to vinegar. I keep stirring them every few days so that it drowns or smothers the mold that might be forming on the top.

Then I pick some coltsfoot leaves and wilt them in hot water. I put several layers of them on top of the berries, tuck them in a little bit around the edges, and put them in the ground in a cool place until freeze-up.



Coltsfoot leaf.

Image: www.cas.vanderbilt.edu/bioimages/image/t/tufa--lf010616-37e5387.htm

When the weather gets cold enough to freeze them, I take the layer of leaves off and clean up the mold around the edges. Mashed berries with a lot of juice freeze pretty hard, so when I want to eat some, I chip them out with the point of a sturdy knife.

A barrel is not a very good way to store those berries, because the barrel gets wider as it goes down. Unless the berries are thoroughly mashed and covered with juice right to the surface, mold will get in around the top of your covering as your berries settle.

Sasha and I used to pour peanut oil on top of the blueberries. It would spread out as everything settled, and keep it completely sealed. When it got cold, the layer of oil would congeal to the point that we could easily lift it off, and use it in baking.¹

I also dried berries—blueberries especially, but I have dried cranberries too.

Cleaning berries can be rather tedious. I have some hardware cloth in a frame. It's probably less than half-inch mesh—I don't know exactly. One edge is not fastened to the frame, and is hanging down a little.



Oliver sorting cranberries on wire mesh.

Image: Devta Khalsa

I dump a bucket of cranberries onto that hardware cloth. Then I use a feather to scrape some of the berries out into the open, where I can see them and pick out the larger stuff.

The bigger berries run down the hardware cloth and over that free edge into a basket. The smaller ones, the stems, and a lot of the trash just fall through the mesh. I put the cleaned berries into a storage container.

As for blueberries, they get juicy and wet as they ripen, and then they're very hard to clean. I try to keep them clean right out in the field as I pick them.

I have a dish towel, or sometimes a big Turkish towel, with wide hems sewn along each edge. I fit a couple of long birch sticks into those channels and fasten a spreader bar to both ends to keep the side pieces apart. The lower bar is a little shorter, so that the cloth has quite a belly in it and hangs under the stick.

I prop up that upper spreader, or just hold it in my hand, and pour a few blueberries onto the upper end of the towel. I run my fingers along underneath the cloth to raise it just a little bit, and the berries that are ahead of it roll on down into a container. The leaves and spiders and little sticks that the wind didn't blow away when I *tiktiked*² them stay on the cloth. Between the tiktiking and running down that chute, they end up pretty clean.

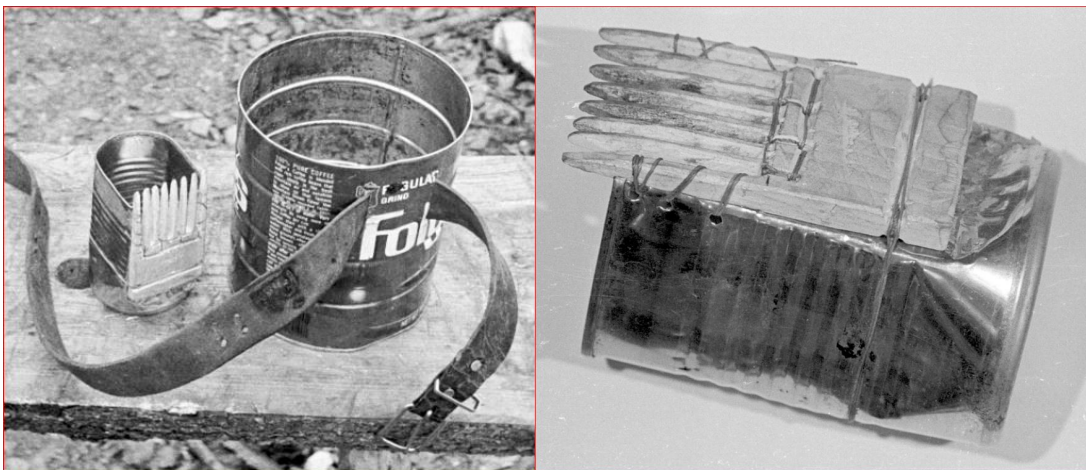
Some of the berries will be riper than others. I have a feather there again, or a wingtip actually, and if I find some berries that don't want to roll on down, I flick them off. Every once in a while I tip the whole chute over, so it's standing on edge, and thump the bottom to knock the accumulated stems and leaves off. Then I repeat the process with the next berries.

If the berries are a little damp and don't winnow well, you have to have an educated tongue when you eat them.

Cranberries

Depending on the season, cranberries could usually be counted on—not always in the same place, but somewhere around.

Cranberries are good keepers. I usually have a year ahead on cranberries, and quite often I end up giving quite a few of them away. Sometimes, but not too often, I just discard them. If I have berries left over, that means I don't have to pick quite so many that year.



Oliver's cranberry picking outfit. Oliver would slide the small can with the comb horizontally around the ground to pick the berries from their stalks.



The picking can has a folded-down flap that keeps the berries from rolling out.
Images: Curt Madison

Reindeer Moss

What are some of the other plant foods that you used?

Reindeer moss is quite edible, but it's very acidic. You have to soak it, say with ash water or soda, to neutralize the acids. You can also soak it in water and squeeze the water out. You have to change the water two or three times.

Quite often I soak it, pour the water off, and put hot water on it, something like cooking it. Then I pour that water off and spread the material out to dry. What you have left is a rather high quality carbohydrate. You can cook it, or you can eat it raw if you have to.

The nice thing about it is that if you know where to look and then keep in mind where you saw it in the summertime, you can always go back in the wintertime, shovel the snow away with a snowshoe, and get your reindeer moss and lichens. That is a food supply. Of course it's more work if you have to get rid of an overburden of two or three feet of snow.

Rock Tripe

Rock tripe is a type of lichen that grows on the rocks is quite edible, but needs some of the same kind of treatment. It doesn't have leaves, but it has a big, somewhat fleshy leaf-like growth to it, and grows off the logs or ground.

If you're hard up and you're in an area with lots of trees and moss, they are the most edible natural foods that you can find. They're easily digestible, and they're plentiful. The Franklin expedition, I think it was, depended on rock tripe quite a bit when they were starving to death.

As far as I know, we don't have it in any place that I've been—possibly in Norway—but there is another kind of tripe that grows in most areas where reindeer moss grows. I know the plant, and have eaten it, but I'm not sure of the name.

Where did you eat it?

At the lake. I found some out there. You have to pick it carefully, because it grows down on the dirt. You take the part that's clean.



Petaled Rock Tripe (the leathery one), New England

Image source: <http://www.newenglandtrailreview.com/images.asp?TID=163&offset=61>

How did you prepare it?

I tore it up a little bit, soaked it overnight, poured the water off, and put it back in new water. I parboiled it, poured that water off also, put it back in more water, and cooked it until it was tender.

How did it taste?

It was a little bit acidic. I ate it, but the next time I cooked it, I put a little soda in the water, and that made it OK. I think that probably if a fellow would use a little bit of ashes in the cooking water, it would do the same thing as the soda.

Willow Leaves

Then there are willow leaves. Some are good to eat, and some are not so good. When they come out in the spring and the leaves are still not too big, you can go around and taste them, see which ones are more edible, and pick those.

I have several willow patches around my place. I'll go and cut the new growth off the top of them. They're hard to reach, and it's very hard for me to stand up and reach up, so I'll cut a whole bunch of those little stems with the leaves on them, go home, sit down in comfort, pick the leaves off, and dry them up.

How do you use the dried leaves?

They crumble when they're dry. Sometimes I just mash them down into a bag or something. More recently I've gotten different grinders that work very well. I can run them through there, and they come out in powder form. I just add the powder to whatever food I'm eating. Sometimes I put it into cooked food—add it to oatmeal or something like that.

I usually keep No. 10 cans of dried carrots, green beans, and celery on hand. I can grind all of them and just mix them together. I can scoop them out and put them in foods or in soups, but I don't often bother with that. I just sprinkle them on top of oats or whatever.

Any other plant foods?

There is a historical record of a famine in Norway or one of those northern European countries. They ground up the inner bark of birch trees, mixed it with wheat flour, and use it for cooking or baking in some way. I've never tried it.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) *tiktik* = winnow.