

## Native Bounty

by Mary Alves, HSMC Horticulturist and Landscape Manager

Every year, during the celebration of Woodland Indian Discovery Day at Historic St. Mary's City, we set out a mat with samples of native foods. Since the event is held in September, wild foods that can be collected in the fall are featured. The amazing thing is how few people can recognize some of the most common fruits and nuts. This situation is indicative of just how different our food heritage is from the American Indians whose diet included so many of these species.

By the time of European contact, the Indians were cultivating their main sources of food (corn, beans and squash), but they still supplemented the vegetarian portion of their diet with seasonal collections of wild foods. Although we know that some food was preserved by drying for use out of season, there was a much greater reliance on what was available at any given time. This meant that knowing where wild foods grew and just when to harvest was precious knowledge, mostly shared by women.



Modern researchers have identified almost 200 potential sources of food from plants growing in Southern Maryland. Early in the spring there was heavy reliance on root crops. These tended to be found in upriver marshes where the salinity is low. Plants such as tuckahoe (*Peltandra virginica*), groundnut (*Apios Americana*), and golden club (*Orontium aquiticum*) were used. In higher salinity areas, bulrushes, cattails and reed grass provided edible roots, green shoots, cane sugar and seeds. These sources were especially important since they were available when dried corn was running low.

As the season progressed, the summer fruits and berries became available - strawberries, raspberries, blueberries and mulberries leading the list. In the marshes, seed could be collected from wild grasses.

When the cooler days of fall arrived, larger fruits such as persimmon and paw paw were harvested. With these a vast array of nuts might also be gathered, including acorns, black walnuts, hickories and chestnuts.

Although early explorers rave about the plenty of the land, the colonists seem to have made limited use of these resources, except in extreme circumstances. Six months after John Smith's departure from Jamestown in 1609, his account tells us that the remaining colonists "preserved for the most part, by roots, herbs, acorns, walnuts, berries."

Several factors may have contributed to the early colonists' lack of enthusiasm for collecting. It has been noted in recent research on eating habits that food preferences are



well-established cultural traits. The colonists, like most immigrants, tended to favor the foods of their homeland. Nonetheless, they were willing to adopt some cultivated crops of the Americas, like corn, especially since English grains did not prosper without well-plowed fields.

But Maryland planters, totally preoccupied with the business of growing tobacco, even needed laws to make them grow enough corn to feed themselves. The time consuming and unprofitable practice of wild collecting was not on their agenda. Besides that there may have been something of a cultural distain for the process of gathering food. Consider the comment made by Beauchamp Plantagenet, of the Province of New Albion, in 1648, "He that is lazy...may live as an Indian ...sometimes wilde peas and vetches, and Long Oats, sometimes Tuckahoe ... sometime small nuts, filbirds, walnuts...(sic)".

Another consideration is that collecting was mostly women's work and the colony was short on women. When they did arrive, they found it more convenient to establish garden beds and grow English vegetables than to venture very far into unfamiliar and frightening forests and swamps. Gathering known foods such as wild strawberries, raspberries, and 'sallet' greens could probably be accomplished close to home. This was important since gardens and crops required close attention and limited the time that could be spent in wild collecting.



Archaeological evidence does confirm that hickory and/or walnuts were being collected despite the fact that American wild nuts have small nuts and hard, difficult to crack, shells, compared with the cultivated species of Europe. The colonists also found them to be less tasty, except for the American chestnut, which surpassed the European variety.

A look at the first published American Cookbook, written by Amelia Simmons in 1796, shows a notable lack of wild foods, although it does include recipes for pumpkin pie, and flapjacks using Indian meal, demonstrating that cultivated American foods had indeed worked their way into the common diet. Instructions for preserving mulberries are the only reference to wild collected food.

Fermenting wild fruits for drink did tempt some. There is mention of persimmon being used to make beer, and native grapes were tried for wine, although their sugar content proved to be too low to produce a potent or even palatable drink.

In our own times many children have heard of the pawpaw from a Disney song, but have never seen or tasted one. Housing developers, in search of catchy names for subdivisions, give us the only reminders that persimmons are part of the scene. Whatever collecting is done seems to be mostly for ornamental purposes - grapevine wreaths or dried flower arrangements.

The abundance and variety of Maryland's resources, extolled by George Alsop's flowery verse, written in 1666, are often unappreciated by modern inhabitants, although we can all aspire to his line "Dwell here, live plentifully and be rich."

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