

Conservation Corner

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“What will come from the briar but the berry.” Irish Proverb

We have two briar patches in our orchard, red raspberries from my mom’s garden and black raspberries from Clark’s grove. Last weekend I finally got around to pruning last year’s canes and pulling this year’s growth of brome grass and volunteer trees. Doubtless the clean-up would have been easier a month ago! For my efforts I gained a few scratches and slivers, the promise of raspberries to enjoy throughout the summer, and a topic for this week’s encounter with the plant world.

Our Nature Center Library holds nature books, biographies, and many guidebooks along with a few cookbooks including *The Forager’s Harvest* and *Incredible Wild Edibles*. I had the chance to hear their author Samuel Thayer speak at an IAN workshop. He kept us entertained and informed with stories of growing up in Wisconsin, collecting and eating wild foods every chance he got. Today Thayer still hunts and gathers as he speaks and writes for a living.

Incredible Wild Edibles includes a section on the Bramble Berries – blackberry, dewberry, red and black raspberry, thimbleberry, wineberry, salmonberry, plumboy, and cloudberry. As Thayer comments, “Along with blueberries and wild strawberries, these are the only wild berries one can collect and still be considered totally normal.”

Bramble berries, the most popular wild foods on our continent, are abundant and easy to recognize. All have been domesticated recently, so cultivated forms vary little from their wild cousins. All may be eaten raw without any preparation and have no large seeds to be removed. Best of all, they are all delicious.

Not surprisingly, brambles are members of the rose family. Their genus *Rubus* includes over 100 species of perennial shrubs with blackberry and raspberry-like fruits growing on canes or creeping stems. Brambles grow from tough rhizomes with multiple stems. The first year stems grow quickly to their full height, hardening and becoming semi-woody by autumn. In the second year these stems grow short branches that bear flowers and fruit, after which they die.

Red raspberry is the most prolific bramble, growing over many thousands of square miles across North America in every clearcut, forest edge, or young woods. They do fine on well-drained and sandy uplands as well as wet ground along the edges of lakes, rivers, and swamps. Red raspberry canes have stiff hairs rather than prickles or thorns. Their familiar berries ripen throughout summer and fall, easily falling from the receptacle when ripe.



The black raspberry has broad-based, stout prickles with canes that arch over and root at the tips where they touch the ground. Berries are borne in tight clusters and ripen in early summer, turning a dark purple-black and easily falling off the receptacle. Black raspberries are very popular in the eastern states where each June and July millions of people head to parks, backyards, fencelines, and rural roadsides to fill their pails with flavor and color. Already I can almost taste and see the first raspberry shake of the season!