

Bountiful Berries

By Ann Clements for The Malaspina Naturalist Club

I know the blackberries are ready when the area around my bird feeders is splattered with purple. The August blackberry crop provides abundant food for local birds and mammals including the two legged wine and jam makers. The West Coast is famous for these bountiful berries, whose arrival we celebrate during Powell River's annual Blackberry Days Festival.

Our dominant blackberry, the Himalayan in the genus *Rubus*, is an Asian species introduced by English settlers. It has enthusiastically adapted to the coast, guarding its territory with thick stands of white flowered canes studded with strong, sharp thorns.

The Himalayan blackberry is only one of many native *Rubus* species of blackberries and raspberries. You can tell the difference when you pick them. A raspberry has a hollow core when picked while a blackberry retains its centre. These berries have historically been an important source of carbohydrates in our ecosystem. The coast does not have abundant supplies of starchy grains or tubers, but it is rich in berries.

The harvest starts in late May with the salmonberry. While less flavourful than the blackberries, how welcome these golden to red raspberries must have been to early inhabitants after the long winter. They are followed by the black raspberry, often found in disturbed, open areas. The thimbleberry is a flatter raspberry with many seeds. It is also found in open forest sites. It has a mealy taste and dries well but is usually overlooked today. Perhaps the most delicious of all our *Rubus* species is the tiny, trailing blackberry. It quickly overruns open sites and wraps its prickles around the ankles of passers by. As a result, it is often treated as a weed but try tasting one before you pull it from your garden.

Edible coastal berries are also found in the genus *Vaccinium* which includes the yummy huckleberries and blueberries. Salal, prized by florists for its leaves, produces a black juicy berry, which makes a fine jelly. My favourite berry bush is the beautiful Mahonia or Oregon grape. Its bright yellow flowers are followed by a lovely green berry that turns deep blue when ripe. Though too tart to eat, they make a delicious jelly and look lovely in a native plant garden.

Our area is blessed with a wealth of other edible berries that rival those few described above. If you are interested in more information on the local flora, contact the Malaspina Naturalist Club at -----.