
NATURE LIBRARY

WILD FOODS

FRANK BRAZIER, Blue Jay Bookshop, Box 1121, Regina, Saskatchewan, S4P 3B4

The other day I chanced to hear part of a radio broadcast about the food buying habits of Saskatchewan people living in the smaller communities. The speaker deplored the practices of rural shoppers who far too often spend their money on eatables of dubious nutritional value but of very high price. I suddenly realized that these people were probably unaware of the abundant wild foods waiting to be harvested in many places in the Province. No doubt that applies to most of us.

Over the past several years there have been many books published describing wild foods, plants in particular, which are free for the taking. Relatively few people have done any serious gathering (with the possible exception of nuts and mushrooms), which is probably fortunate, since the wild stocks could hardly stand the assault of millions of gatherers trampling the countryside to harvest free food. Two of the earlier books were *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* and *Stalking the Healthful Herbs* by the late Euell Gibbons, and among the most recent are three from The National Museums of Canada, in "The Edible Wild Plants of Canada" series:

No. 1: EDIBLE GARDEN WEEDS OF CANADA by Adam F. Szczawinski and Nancy J. Turner, paper, coil binding, \$8.95;

No. 2: WILD COFFEE AND TEA SUBSTITUTES OF CANADA by Nancy J. Turner and Adam F. Szczawinski, paper, coil binding, \$6.95;

No. 3: EDIBLE WILD FRUITS AND NUTS OF CANADA by Nancy J. Turner and Adam F. Szczawinski, paper, coil binding, \$9.95;

No. 4: EDIBLE WILD GREENS OF CANADA is promised for 1980.

In the Introduction to No. 1, the authors refer to a table in Euell Gibbon's *Stalking the Healthful Herbs* that compares the nutritional values of wild foods with cabbage, celery, lettuce, onions, peppers and spinach. The wild plant foods equalled, and in many cases surpassed, those commonly-used garden vegetables.

Each book in "The Edible Wild Plants of Canada" series contains a bibliography detailing particulars of useful books on the subject of wild plant foods. Accompanying each wild plant described are many recipes. Where dangerous similar plants are known warnings also appear. These books are of particular value in western Canada as most of the species described are listed in *Wild Plants of the Canadian Prairies* by A.C. Budd and K.F. Best (now superseded by Looman & Best: *Budd's Flora of the Canadian Prairies.*)

Of the other wild plant food books

we have, among the most popular is *How Indians Use Wild Plants for Food, Medicine and Crafts* by F. Densmore (Dover, \$4.00, paper). This describes the uses of wild plants by the Minnesota Chippewa. While the subject is not treated as extensively nor as attractively as in the Canadian "Edible Wild Plant" series, this book mentions plants not included in that series, such as Arrowhead, Bulrush, Bur Oak acorns.

Wild Plums in Brandy by Sylvia Boorman (McGraw-Hill, Ryerson, \$4.95, paper) is a wild foods cookery book which has mouth-watering wild fruit, fish, game and gamebird recipes, and which adds wildflowers, mushrooms and the cattail flower spike to the list treated in the preceding books.

Two old-timers that still give useful service are: *Edible Wild Plants* by O.P. Medsger (Macmillan, \$4.50, paper) and *Edible and Useful Wild Plants of the United States and Canada* by C.F. Saunders (Dover, \$4.00, paper). The former appeared in 1939 and will be particularly treasured by devotees of Ernest Thompson Seton since he wrote the Introduction. In the Foreword the author records his indebtedness to C.F. Saunders' book which first came out in 1920. Many of the plants discussed in both books occur in western Canada and the books are useful for that reason.

Earth Medicine, Earth Foods by M.A. Weiner (Collier, \$6.75, paper) is a guide to wild plants utilized by Indians for food and other purposes. About 40 of the food plants described grow in western Canada.

The foregoing titles are just a few of those currently available. The latest "Subject Guide to Books in Print", under the heading "Plants, Edible" lists about 30 titles which guide the gatherer of wild plants. The current "Lengthy Booklist" of The BLUE JAY

BOOKSHOP describes 14 such titles, exclusive of mushroom guides. The titles described above are the inexpensive ones most useful for the beginner who wishes to try wild plant gathering for food. All beginners, whether they are naturalists trying out wild food gathering for a different experience, or harried housewives intent on stretching the food budget dollar to get the best nutrition possible for their families, should try and get the guidance of a field botanist when consulting these books, for the reasons given below.

Among the food plants described in *Earth Medicine, Earth Foods* are Cow Parsnip and Bracken Fern. The young, tender leaf and flower stalks of the former were eaten raw by Indian tribes across North America. The stems, after preparation, taste like celery and are highly nutritious, containing about 18% protein. The young plants of the latter are recommended as a wild food; the Bracken Fern is popular in New Zealand and Japan and was utilized by several Indian tribes. I have selected these two food plants as examples to emphasize the need for anyone harvesting wild foods to know thoroughly the dangerous species. The Cow Parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum*) is a desirable wild food but there is a danger that the unwary could include specimens of its toxic relatives, the water hemlocks (*Circuta bulbifera*, *C. douglassii*, *C. maculata*) as there is a superficial resemblance. This confusion could be fatal. Again, while no one will drop down dead after a meal which includes Bracken Fern, a warning has been inserted, belatedly, into *Edible Garden Weeds of Canada* that this fern contains an unidentified carcinogen and should not be eaten at all. This particular book does have an Appendix: Some Weeds You Should Avoid, which makes it a worthwhile purchase indeed for the wild food gatherer.

It is only prudent that gatherers know thoroughly the poisonous plants they might encounter. They could well invest in such books as: *Common Poisonous Plants of the Northern Plains Dangerous to Man* by L.J. Schermeister (N. Dak. State Univ., \$1.10, paper), *Poisonous Plants of the United States* by W.C. Muenscher (Collier, \$5.50, 1939), and *Deadly Harvest* by J.M. Kingsbury (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, \$2.35, paper). These are three books dealing with this important topic. The literature on edible and poisonous fungi is a separate study in itself.

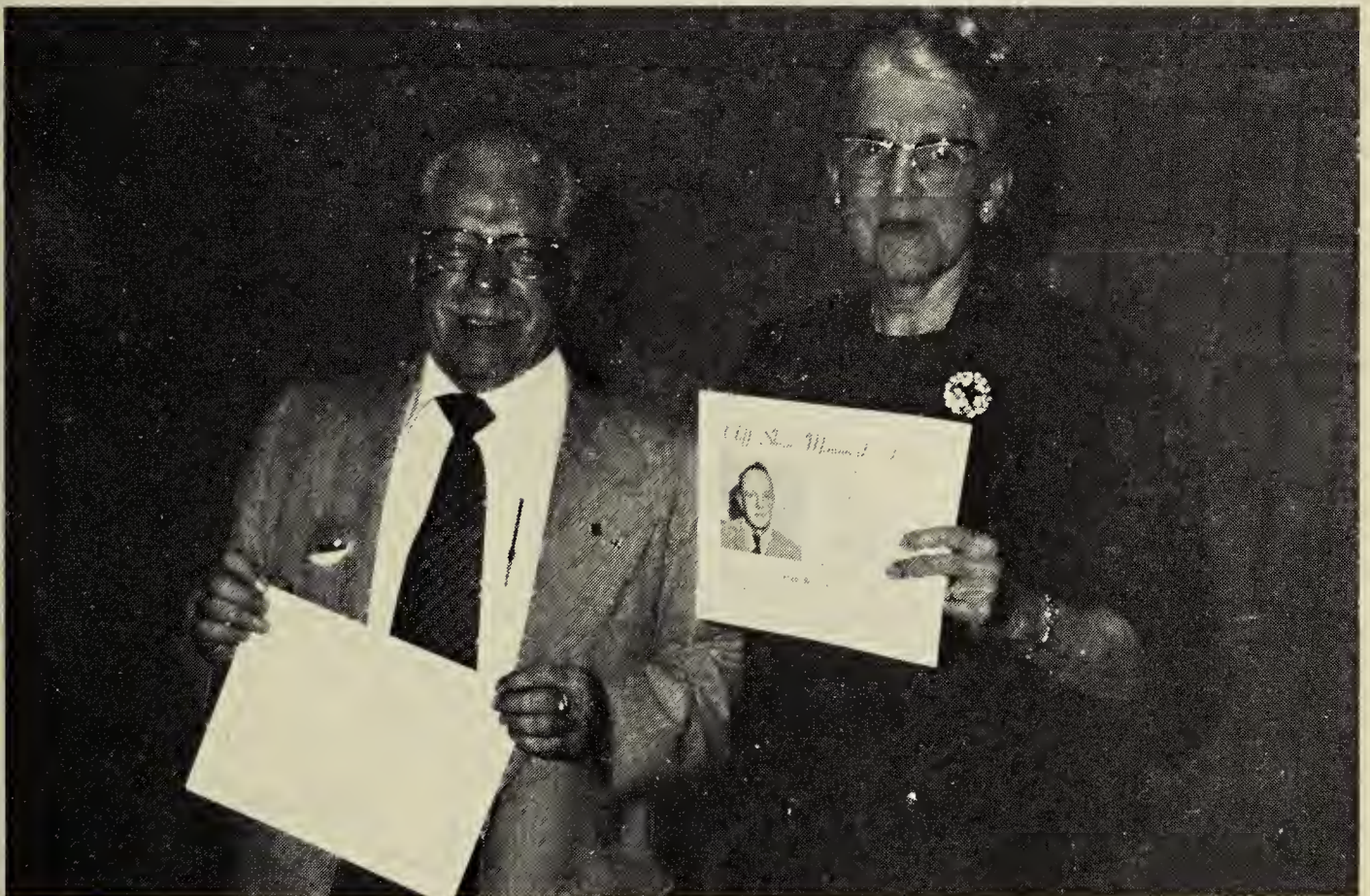
Please note that the prices I have quoted above are the list prices of books still in stock. Replacement supplies could well cost more. However, at any price, books on wild edible plants are worthwhile investments which could well open the door to a new and exciting experience. Incidentally, The BLUE JAY

BOOKSHOP would be glad to report availability and price of any title for any member of SNHS on request. Simply drop us a line at P.O. Box 1121, Regina, Sask. S4P 3B4.

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In press BELCHER, M.: THE BIRDS OF REGINA (REVISED). Several more due soon! Get them as they are published!



1979 AWARD WINNERS: Frank Brazier, who was presented the Conservation Award for his long service to the Society, and the management of the Blue Jay Bookshop, poses with Jean Bancroft of Winnipeg, who was presented the Cliff Shaw Award for a series of articles on bird nesting behavior.

Gary W. Seib