



# Be not hasty to pluck it

Have we been picking blackberries wrong all this time? Ignore the birds and follow the bees for the ultimate hedgerow delight of summer's end, advises Deborah Nicholls-Lee

**I**N August, the knotty brambles that wrap around our fields, woodland and lanes are 'heaving' with blackberries, wrote Sylvia Plath, 'big as the ball of my thumb' and 'fat with blue-red juices. These they squander on my fingers'. For Seamus Heaney, they are 'a glossy purple clot' ripened by the season that is drawing to a close. 'Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it,' he wrote in *Blackberry Picking* (1966).

Putting on a show from bright green to crimson and the darkest of blacks, the blackberry transforms our hedgerows in a final hurrah as summer segues into autumn. What is perhaps most striking about this fruit is its abundance: an invitation to gorge oneself to the point that lips and hands are stained purple. As the American poet Mary Oliver wrote in *August* (1983):

When the blackberries  
hang  
swollen in the woods,  
in the brambles  
nobody owns, I spend  
all day among the high  
branches, reaching  
my ripped arms, thinking  
of nothing, cramming



the black honey of summer  
into my mouth

This act of gathering, this meditative pastime that goes back millennia, inspired Victorian artists, in particular. Painters such as Myles Birket Foster, Joseph Paulman, Walter Bonner Gash and Elizabeth Adela Forbes all depicted women and children blackberry picking against the beautiful backdrop of the British countryside. In these idealised works, there are no stained aprons or scratched limbs, but instead the unconstrained energy of children's play. This device comes across in many of Foster's paintings, including *Children Gathering Blackberries* (1899), which depicts girls crowding around a blackberry bush, grabbing at its thorny branches.

**'In a brimming saucer, with golden Alderney cream and a soupçon of powdered sugar, blackberries are Olympian nectar'**

Not everyone is as enthusiastic about blackberries as the children in the paintings Foster devoted to the subject. The Victorian novelist and food writer Sarah Sharp Hamer (1839–1927), writing under the pen name of Phyllis Browne, notes that many cooks are underwhelmed by the bramble's rather flavourless and gritty fruit. 'A chief reason why blackberries are so little esteemed is that they are nearly always gathered before they are ripe,' she writes. 'Early blackberries are a delusion; they are sour, hard and unprofitable; they consist mostly of seeds, and they yield very little juice for their weight.'

To make her point, Ms Browne quotes the American novelist and essayist Donald Grant Mitchell (1822–1908). 'If you wish to enjoy the richness of the blackberry, you must not be hasty to pluck it,' he wrote. 'When the children say with a shout, "The blackberries are ripe," I know they are black only, and I can wait. When the children report, "The birds are eating the berries," I know I can wait. But when they say, "The bees are on the berries," I know they are at their ripest. Then with baskets we sally out.'

Even then, the epicurean must be discerning. 'We gather those only which drop at the touch,' he continues. 'These, in a brimming saucer, with golden Alderney cream and a soupçon of powdered sugar, are Olympian nectar; they melt before the tongue can measure their full roundness, and seem to be mere bloated bubbles of forest honey.'

Ripe blackberries also make splendid liqueurs, wines and cordials (*see box*). Home-made bramble jelly is a delightful accompaniment to savoury dishes and adding the berries to puddings, such as a traditional roly-poly or an apple crumble, adds colour and a satisfying tang.

Of course, it's not only humans who feed from the bramble bushes. Foxes, badgers, dormice and bank voles are among a long list of opportunist blackberry-snackers, with birds, wasps and bees also joining the feast. Moths and butterflies will feed from the juiciest specimens, laying their eggs on the crisp leaves, which, for some species, double as dinner after hatching.

'Blackberries are an important resource for animals fattening up for a winter migration, laying down fat for hibernation or for getting into a good condition to survive the winter,' notes naturalist and bramble enthusiast Nick Martin, nature reserves manager at Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and founder of British countryside blog *All Things Wildlife*.





No mouse's house is better than Jill Barklem's Brambly Hedge when the blackberries ripen

Yet it's not only during the fruit-bearing months that *Rubus fruticosus* puts on a show. When the hot sun has dried up the berries or cold weather and humidity have shrouded them in grey mould, the bramble's richly rainbow-coloured leaves provide one of autumn's most striking displays. When

spring comes back around, the bushes are smothered in sprays of delicate, milky-white and powder-pink blossoms. The bramble's long flowering season, which extends from May until late summer, caters to a range of insects with different flight periods, →



There's no fear of scratches in Myles Birket Foster's *Children Gathering Blackberries*

points out Mr Martin, and offers up 'one of the richest nectar sources there is'.

For all its lovely colours and abundant fruit, the bramble is often unpopular with gardeners. Left unchecked, it can cause mischief to both house and garden, damaging walls and fencing and invading the space of other shrubs. 'It's actually resented by many people,' laments Mr Martin. 'It's a plant of succession, of change, so it's not something you tend to maintain. It's something that tries to close up grassy meadows, jostles for the space on footpaths and, for people who like an uninterrupted carpet of bluebells, represents a bit of competition.'

**‘Foresters would throw acorns into the middle of a bramble bush, knowing it would help them get away’**

The bramble is among our most domineering woodland species, throwing up long bowing canes that grow at a rate of up to almost 3in per day and muscling through the undergrowth with its thorny grip. Fruiting in its second year, it can tolerate temperatures as low as -25°C and its underground suckers help it to propagate at speed.

Although bramble is often seen as a thug, Mr Martin insists that 'it's definitely

undervalued because it has so much to offer in terms of native wildlife'. By protecting saplings from severe weather or browsing animals such as deer, bramble makes 'a great natural tree nursery,' he explains. 'It used to be common practice for foresters to throw acorns into the middle of the bramble bush, knowing it would help them get away.'

Brambles also make a handy refuge for animals. 'Deer, badgers, foxes and rabbits can all tuck themselves away in the bushes undisturbed,' continues Mr Martin. 'You'll often see little tunnels underneath the bramble bushes where the rabbits have their exits. They can run from the grassy margins and back into the brambles knowing that they're not going to get pursued.'

Despite its hostile appearance, the bramble features in many homoeopathic remedies. A tonic can be made of the roots and leaves that, when gargled, may help to treat oral discomfort and disease due to its high anti-inflammatory, anti-viral and antibacterial properties. Rich in tannins, the plant is also thought to settle upset stomachs. In terms of nutrition, the blackberry ranks highly due to its generous fibre and manganese content and its high levels of vitamins C and K.

The bramble's ubiquity has attracted numerous superstitions and beliefs. In medieval times, brambles were planted around graves to stop the dead from rising and people would pass their children beneath its prickly arches in the hope of curing illness. Lest you should indulge too long in blackberries, Christian tradition prescribes ceasing the harvest in advance of Old Michaelmas Day ('Our last hurrah',

## Phyllis Browne's boozy blackberry cordial

Got a glut of blackberries? This cordial recipe borrowed from Victorian cookery writer Phyllis Browne is simple to make and—if you can part with it—makes a lovely gift. Do heed her advice and sit on your hands until the fruit is at its ripest.

### Ingredients

1 pint (570ml) blackberry juice  
12oz (350g) caster sugar  
½tspn each of whole or crushed  
cloves, nutmeg, allspice and  
cinnamon  
Small bottle of French brandy

### Method

Wash your freshly picked blackberries thoroughly, crush them and then strain off the juice. Boil the ingredients until you get a thick syrup and then add enough French brandy to double the volume. Stir, bottle and seal.



October 2, 2023). It was on this day that Lucifer, falling from Heaven, landed amid brambles and cursed the plant.

A Manx ritual, which marries with the advice of our Victorian food writers, advises leaving the first fruit for the fairy folk—a good maxim if you wish to avoid the scratching and whipping of branches that comes with trying to detach stubborn fruit

before it's ripe. As Ms Browne muses, 'perhaps it was to protect her

against the peril of being picked too early that

Mother Nature supplied

it with its terrible

armour'. 🐉

