



Meet the ‘Johnny Appleseed’ of native edible plants

Cohen says the “you can eat it too” attribute of many native species offers a powerful incentive for people and organizations to “go native” in their landscaping.

By Barbara A. Schmitz
Russ Cohen grew up at the end of a dead-end street in a woodsy suburb west of Boston, spending loads of time in the woods and developing a natural bond with nature.

But it was first as a sophomore in high school that connecting to nature by nibbling on it became his passion. As a 16-year-old, Cohen recalls taking a mini-class on edible botany that ignited his lifelong af-

Russ Cohen shows off some of the native plants growing inside his nursery.



Photo by Bruce Fellman

Russ with Black Walnut Honey Squares at the Avalonia Land Conservancy meeting, March 2017.

fection with native plants. “I learned about 2 dozen species of plants that grew in our area, and we made a communal meal,” he recalls.

That summer, he went to the town’s library and took out every book he could find on the subject. Soon, he had discovered more than 70 species of edible native plants in the area, and by the time he was a senior in high school, he was teaching the same class he had taken as a sophomore.

By college, Cohen says he was already sharing his love of edible native plants. “I had a handmade flyer that I would stick outside the college cafeteria, telling people to follow me around campus and learn what they could nibble on.”

But it was when he went back to New England in the 1980s that Cohen really started offering edible native plant walks and talks on a regular basis. He estimates he gives more than 40 presentations each year, and he’s been doing it for 45 or so years. “It was my second career when I was working,” he says, laughing and acknowledging it’s been easier to keep up that pace since he retired in June 2015 as the rivers ad-

vocate for the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game’s Division of Ecological Restoration.

A Wild Ones member who previously belonged to the Mountain Laurel (Connecticut) chapter and who now belongs to the South Shore Massachusetts chapter, Cohen says he gives the edible native plant walks and talks for a simple reason. “It’s just a subject I find really fun,” he says. “I don’t do it with any kind of mission, or evaluate my own performance on how many people I convert. I just like to share my knowledge, enthusiasm, passion and love for the subject, and what I hope to do is walk around with people and at least entertain them during the time they have with me.”

In his retirement, Cohen has taken his foraging walks and talks one giant step forward. He now gathers seed from a wide variety of native edible species, and then, propagates and plants them — with permission, of course — on properties such as nature preserves, land trusts, cities, towns, tribal lands, and property

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owned by schools and colleges and state and federal agencies. In the process, Cohen has become known as a “Johnny Appleseed” of sorts for edible native species. In fact, he has set up his own small nursery in Weston, Massachusetts, where he grows and keeps plants that he propagates from seed. In the past three years, he has initiated more than 20 such projects.

“I’ve been nibbling on nature since the 1970s and have felt immense gratitude to Mother Nature for giving me all these yummy things to eat,” he says. “Just seeing edible plants along a trail enriches the time you spend outdoors. And if you like being outdoors, just know-

ing about edible plants makes it all that more interesting.”

Cohen says for decades he has been taking note as he traverses nature preserves, parks and other properties about which type of plants like to grow in particular spots. So when he sees a spot that’s appropriate for a specific native plant, he’ll ask if he can plant it there. And if he sees a native plant on public or private property that he would like to gather seed from to propagate, he’ll ask to do that, too. No one has ever said no.

“In fact, if you ask people if you can collect their black walnuts in October when the nuts are falling off the trees and piling onto their lawns, they say yes and go get their wheelbarrow to help you,” he says. “People are happy to see someone use them.”

And so Cohen continues to gather seed and nuts, or have seed and nuts donated to him, sow them and tend the young plants — until they grow and are ready to be transplanted on publicly accessible conserva-

tion land. He gives away everything he grows.

Cohen says he keeps track in his calendar of when things will ripen and notes when to go out to look for particular seeds. “For instance, Sept. 8 is the day to go out and pick hazelnuts in Eastern Massachusetts,” he says. “I’ve discovered that is the date when the nuts are ripe, but haven’t fallen off the bushes yet. Because if you let that happen, you will never find them, since the squirrels and chipmunks will get all of them before you do.”

He eats some of the nuts he gathers, and saves the rest to grow new plants. “But if you’re going to plant nuts, you can’t let them dry

out," he says. So he keeps nuts he collects, such as black walnuts and butternuts, in plastic bags filled with vermiculite and stored in the refrigerator until he's ready to sow them.

Some plants need to be cared for longer, such as beach plums (*Prunus maritima*), often found in sand dune habitats, which need to be at least 1-foot tall before they are planted out or otherwise they'll be severely browsed by rabbits, he says. For other plants, he wraps cylinders of hardware cloth around them to protect them from animals such as deer, squirrels or chipmunks. "If only they knew what I was doing would eventually benefit them..." he says, laughing, adding that perhaps then they'd stop eating the small plants in exchange for the long-term gain.

There are other plants that need no special treatment, such as wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*). You just sow the seed, and they will start growing in the same growing season, he says. But Cohen says he is still trying to figure out how to grow some plants, such as Carrion Flower (*Smilax herbacea*), which smells like dirty gym socks, but whose edible shoots look and taste like asparagus. "Plus some woodland perennials can take multiple years, since their seeds need to go through multiple periods of warm and cold before the young sprouts will emerge. My learning curve has been very steep. But I learned from a mentor: 'Think about how it happens in nature, and try to mimic it as much as you can.'"

Every time he's out walking on any property, Cohen says he is taking note of what plants are already there, and also making up a list of edible native species that should do well if planted on that property. How does he figure out what plants should grow there?

"This is a skill based on decades of observation and paying attention to what grows where," he says. "When I see a white pine forest, there are two common groundcovers: partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*)

Recipes

Russ Cohen's Triple Maple Hickory-Nut Sandwich Cookies

Makes 25-30 sandwich cookies

(**Note:** The "triple" in the cookie name comes from the three types of maple products used in this recipe: maple syrup, maple sugar and maple cream. I have found maple creams to vary in their firmness/runniness; you want it to be spreadable, but not runny. If it is too stiff, stir in a bit of maple syrup to soften it; if it is too runny, stir in enough maple sugar to thicken it to the right consistency.)

Ingredients:

1 cup softened butter
1/2 cup granulated or powdered maple sugar
4 tablespoons maple syrup
1 large egg yolk
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
2 cups flour
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 3/4 cups coarsely chopped Shagbark Hickory (*Carya ovata*) nuts (can substitute pecans or walnuts if necessary)
Maple cream for spreading (about 1/3 to 1/2 cup)

Beat butter in a large mixing bowl for 3 minutes or until creamy. Beat in maple sugar gradually. Add maple syrup, egg yolk and vanilla extract to the bowl; beat well. Mix flour and salt together and add gradually to the other ingredients in the mixing bowl; then add the chopped hickory nuts and mix until well blended.

Place the mixing bowl with dough into the fridge for at least a half hour until it stiffens. Then remove from the fridge, divide the dough in half and shape into "logs" about two inches in diameter. Wrap with plastic wrap, waxed paper or parchment and refrigerate again until firm (at least an hour).

Preheat oven to 350° and get a greased cookie tray or two ready. Slice the logs into rounds between 1/8" and 1/4" thick, then place the rounds onto the cookie sheet, leaving some space between the slices (they will spread out a bit during baking).

Bake for 12-15 minutes at 350°; remove cookie tray from oven. The undersides of the cookies should be a golden brown color. If not, leave in for a few minutes more; if so, then flip all the cookies over, re-insert in oven and bake 4-8 minutes more until both sides of cookies have a (or are close to a) golden brown color.

Remove cookies from cookie sheet, allow to cool until room temperature, then pair the rounds up into (more or less) matched pairs. Spread about a teaspoon's worth of maple cream on top of one cookie, then gently squish down on it with the second cookie to make a sandwich.

and wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*). If I see one, I am confident that I can plant the other species and it will do well, since the two are frequently found together.”

Cohen says many native species that have value to wildlife are yummy to people too. Juneberries (aka Shadbush, *Amelanchier* spp.), for example, are equally edible by animals (songbirds, e.g.) and people. The taste of the ripe fruit is like a cross between cherries and almonds (they’re all related species in the Rose family). And while he is not propagating or planting them, Cohen freely acknowledges that nonnative species can also be tasty. While he urges erstwhile foragers of native species from wild habitats to use some forbearance and restraint in gathering them so as not to upset the ecological balance, that is less of a concern with nonnative species. Eating invasive plants such as Autumn olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata* Thunb) or Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*), both native to Asia, provide “guilt-free” foraging opportunities: you can’t pick too many of them. He uses Autumn olive fruits to make fruit

Volunteers help plant native beach plums at the Marblehead Conservancy.

Juneberry Muffins

Makes 1 dozen muffins

From Russ Cohen

Note: This recipe works equally well with fresh, frozen or dried Juneberries. If using dried berries, soak first in hot fruit juice until softened. It is also OK to substitute other fruit such as blueberries, raspberries or cranberries. The flavor and texture of the muffins will differ somewhat depending on the type of berries you use, but the results are likely to be just as tasty.

Ingredients

1 cup rolled oats

1 cup buttermilk or sour milk (to make sour milk, mix 1 cup whole milk with 1 tablespoon lemon or vinegar)

1 cup flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

½ teaspoon baking soda

½ teaspoon salt

¾ cup brown sugar, lightly packed (OK to substitute maple sugar)

1 egg, beaten

¼ cup butter, melted

1 to 1½ cups Juneberries (fresh, dried or frozen)

Combine oats and buttermilk in a small bowl and let stand to allow the oats to soften. Preheat the oven to 400°F. Grease muffin tins. Combine flour, baking powder, baking soda and brown sugar, and stir well. Mix together the beaten egg and melted butter. Add oat/milk mixture to the dry ingredients and stir just until all ingredients are moistened (do not overmix). Fold in the Juneberries. Fill muffin tins ¾ full. Bake for 17–22 minutes, until muffin tops turn golden brown.



Photo by Russ Cohen

rollups in his fruit dehydrator, and pies from Japanese knotweed.

His favorite edible species, of the more than 200 deemed to be native to the ecoregions of the Northeast U.S., is the Shagbark Hickory (*Carya ovata*). "Besides producing delicious edible nuts, it's a beautiful tree, and has a high ecological value." Critters eat the nuts, while it also makes for good bat-roosting habitat on the older trees as they develop their characteristic peeling bark.

Cohen uses the nuts to make maple hickory nut pie. "I'm not exaggerating when I say everyone loves this pie," he says. He also will make a triple hickory nut sandwich cookie with the nuts, which he describes as similar to an Oreo but sweetened with maple sugar and syrup, and maple cream filling in the center with lots of nuts. "At least six people have said to me, 'This could possibly be the best cookie I've ever eaten,'" he says. "It's fun to share dishes made from wild ingredients, and show people how yummy it can be."

In fact, it was the low number of hickory trees that made Cohen decide to set aside some of the nuts he gathered to grow into shagbark seedlings. He also encouraged a Northeast seed company to carry the shagbark hickory and sent them a bagful of wild nuts to start with. Their catalog now includes the shagbark hickory, and credits Cohen. That effort has since broadened, and now Cohen is propagating and planting over 50 different edible native species.

Cohen says it is gratifying to see native plants he planted thriving in areas that were once devoid of them or covered with invasives. He adds that everyone can play a role in promoting native landscaping, even if just done on a small scale. "If you see an individual buckthorn, honeysuckle or other invasive, pop it out and put a native in its place," he says. "It's very satisfying."

Maple Hickory Nut Pie

From Russ Cohen

Pie crust ingredients:

1 cup flour

½ teaspoon salt

1/8 cup cold milk

¼ cup vegetable (canola, sunflower, corn or soybean) oil

Preparation

Sift together flour and salt into a bowl. Pour milk and vegetable oil into a measuring cup, but do not stir. Add this liquid to the flour and mix well with a fork. Dampen a table top or counter with a sponge and smooth a 12" square of wax paper and then cover with another piece of wax paper the same size as the first.

Roll the dough between the pieces of wax paper until it reaches the edges and it will be just the right thickness and size for a 9" or 10" diameter pie. Peel off the top paper, turn the dough sheet over into the pie pan, then carefully remove the remaining piece of waxed paper from the top.

Filling ingredients

3 eggs

7/8 cup maple sugar

½ teaspoon salt

1 cup light corn syrup

1/3 cup melted butter

1½ to 2 cups hickory nuts (No need to chop; large pieces are good for this recipe.)

Preparation

Preheat oven to 350 degree. Beat the eggs slightly, then add maple sugar, salt, corn syrup and melted butter and beat thoroughly. Stir in the hickory nuts, then pour into the unbaked pastry shell. Bake for 55-60 minutes, or until the center of the pie appears firm. Cool before serving.



Photo by Russ Cohen