

# Making Ripples

## Native Harvest: Autumn Wild Edibles

by Amanda Bancroft

Fall is well-known as harvest time, full of delicious food and delightful scents. Pumpkins are predictable. Corn is common. But there is a hidden harvest in hedgerows and country roads all over the Ozarks, and it's mostly celebrated by squirrels. Black walnuts, persimmon, pawpaw and osage orange are sounding their drums on the rooftops and roads as they fall with a thud or a splat.

NPR described the pawpaw as “America’s forgotten fruit,” and they are pretty much right. Not many people have heard of one, and it isn’t common in grocery stores. But farmer’s markets in Northwest Arkansas will occasionally offer pawpaw for sale and sample. They taste something like a cross between a banana and a mango, and folks either love ‘um or hate ‘um.

Black walnuts are notorious for staining clothing, so wear heavy-duty gloves and old clothes if you go out foraging for them. Walnuts are much more well-known than these other native edibles, and most people have eaten them or tried them (some are allergic to them). The coolest part is that, like all wild edibles, they’re free if you can find a tree without trespassing. Processing them to get at the nuts is a challenge, though, and will require some equipment (even if just a hammer) so research this before you gather. The green husk isn’t edible, only the nuts inside the hard shell.

Persimmons are the candied sweet potatoes that grow on trees. Delicate and soft, they are most delicious when fully ripe, which is also the point at which they drop off the tree and splat onto a rock below. To avoid this, many people hold a sheet under a persimmon tree and then shake it to acquire the fruits, which are used in a variety of recipes including pies.

Osage oranges are those alien-looking yellow-green balls that you’ve probably seen squished into the road. Only the seeds are edible to humans, and the fruit can irritate skin. It takes a lot of effort to acquire and roast the seeds, when they are comparable to sunflower seeds which are more easily acquired. Many people enjoy using them as decoration in porch planters.

These four trees are an important part of the heritage of many cultures and settlers in North America, but are also important to wildlife. The pawpaw tree plays host to Zebra Swallowtails, a butterfly that many love. Persimmon and walnut trees are among the host plants of the famous Luna Moth.

So go out and reap the harvest of the Ozarks, if only for a sample or two. It may be an autumn experience you won’t soon forget, and become a seasonal tradition! Just be careful that you

correctly identify plants and fruits, avoid areas that could have been sprayed with pesticides or herbicides, and be aware that there are risks to consuming wild edibles that haven't been processed. Happy harvesting!

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: [www.RipplesBlog.org](http://www.RipplesBlog.org).