Trees and Shrubs for Making Jelly

Photo, special to the Democrat: It’s easy to make jelly with locally grown blueberries, blackberries, or mulberries.

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My earliest memory of picking berries, at about the age of six, is of a blueberry patch on a hot summer day near Woodville. I enjoyed the experience immensely. But, for some reason, I wasn’t allowed to go on the next weekend trip to pick berries. Maybe it was because I had complained about the yellow flies, horse flies or redbugs. Or maybe it was because of the tick that had to be removed from a location I would rather not discuss. It was removed using the hot cigarette method, designed to make the tick think there was a forest fire and that he should back out of his own accord. Anyway, desperately wanting to go on the return berry-picking trip, I ran down Alachua Avenue after my parent’s DeSoto bawling. I guess I loved to pick berries, blue and black.

As a senior in college, I sometimes found picking blackberries at UF’s experimental forest to be more fun than studying. That same year was the first time I made jelly, from elderberries picked along US-19 near Perry.

Two years ago the mulberry trees at McCord Park in Betton Hills had an abundance of fruit. My college age daughter and I went daily to pick as the fruit ripened, carrying a step ladder to reach the high fruit. I think the tall weeds under the trees kept neighbors fearful of snakes and away from ‘my’ tree, and that was a good thing. We ended up with three batches of mulberry preserves, about twenty-one half-pint jars. Delicious! This year, however, these trees offered nothing. I’ll be watching next summer.
Mulberry, blackberry and blueberry are great for making preserves because there is no preparation of the fruit. Just cook, add sugar and stir. I follow the recipe on the Sure-jell package. This summer my son and I spent a nice afternoon together washing jars and lids, smelling blueberries cooking, sealing them tightly and then boxing some up to send to his lonely sister in northern Minnesota.

Chickasaw plum also makes delicious preserves, though it is a tedious process to get the pit out of the small half to three-quarter inch fruit. There is a row of Chickasaw plum trees on Centerville Road between Capital Circle and Potts Road that were loaded with fruit this summer. I saw a family picking them, but I didn’t pick there because of a concern about pollution in the fruit from car fumes. I guess that worries me more than snakes. We planted a Chickasaw plum in our yard; some years are banner years and others we get very little fruit.

The other fruits I like to use are muscadine grapes picked at Monticello Vineyards and kumquats from my own tree. Like the Chickasaw plums, these involve an hour or so of time to pick out seeds. If you make grape jelly you won’t have to pick out seeds since you merely strain all solids, but I prefer preserves with chunks of fruit. You probably can’t convince your teenage kids to pick seeds for you, but if you do the prep work, I bet they would like to see and smell the simple process of making homemade preserves. It is a basic lesson in where our food really comes from.

Anyone of any age would like to pull a jar of blueberry preserves out of the pantry in January to savor the sweet tastes of the summer past. For me there is no better Christmas gift than homemade preserves, except maybe my son’s chocolate truffles!