

There was a time when rural folks made jelly from basically anything. Mayapple jelly was one of those summer traditions.

Mayapple Memories

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

When it comes to advice regarding safe and healthy foods, one really can't argue with a 94-year-old woman who claims Mayapple jelly is good for you.

Nevermind the fact parts of the Mayapple plant (*Podophyllum peltatum*) are known to be toxic. The pale globes of fruit, when ripe, have been transformed into a jelly, or even eaten raw, for ages.

But let's start with the basics. Mayapples aren't really apples at all. The plant, related to the barberry, rises out of rich forest soils in late March and April throughout Illinois, and the deeply lobed, umbrella-like leaves form dense colonies in the shady understory. The plants produce a white flower a few weeks later, and a pea-size fruit soon

Mayapple fruits ripen in mid-summer. The fruits should be pale yellow-green.



appears. As the summer progresses, the green fruits swell to almost golf-ball size and turn pale yellow or almost white. That's when Mayapples are ripe, although few people today know about such things.

"I used to make Mayapple jelly all of the time," grinned 94-year-old Mary Boner of West Frankfort, recalling her days when living off the land was more than an idealistic notion. "Paw paws, blackberries...you name it. We picked 'em and canned everything."

As a young woman living in Union County, Boner would head out to the forested hillsides along the Illinois Central railroad and collect whatever wild food was in season. In mid-to-late summer, after the blackberries and huckleberries were finished, the Mayapples would be ready to pick.

"Let's see...sugar, fruit pectin," this grandmother recited. "I don't think we

ever had a recipe, we just knew how to make it. I'll make you some if you bring me some Mayapples."

And so we did. After inspecting a basket of rather small Mayapples (victims of the 2004 summer drought), Boner handed us a paring knife, a pot, and then put us to work in her kitchen.

Essentially, the fruits were boiled and mashed, then the juices strained through a cloth. Sugar and fruit pectin were added, along with a touch of lemon juice, and after bringing everything to a thick boil, four canning jars of mayapple jelly were soon cooling on her counter.

"Whoooooee," she later exclaimed, nibbling a cracker with Mayapple jelly. "That's got a wang to it." We decided some of the Mayapples used weren't fully ripe.

"It's like an unripe persimmon," she added. "All it takes is one to spoil the flavor."

