Autumn Olive

Ripe berries from an invasive shrub that's fallen out of favor have a surprisingly good flavor.

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

Things went sour for the autumn olive berry years ago. Beginning in the 1950s and 60s, the Asian bush that produces loads of food for wildlife—*Elaeagnus umbellate*—was touted as a boon for natural resources in America. It was promoted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for widespread planting in the Midwest and eastern U.S. through the late 1970s. Land managers were encouraged to plant seedlings wherever they wanted.

"The tendency of autumn olive to spread may keep some people from planting it," a leaflet from the U.S. Department of Agriculture noted in 1965. Yet, the plantings continued for many years thereafter and the loads of juicy berries each bush produced in the fall (up to 30 pounds of berries per bush, according to researchers) seemed a perfect food crop for wildlife.

Everything from white-tailed deer to raccoons and pheasants ate autumn olive. The trouble soon became obvious: Seeds traveled with wildlife and quickly created new bushes, transforming open lands into invasive, autumn-olive jungles.

The rest is monoculture history. Land managers today, armed with selective herbicides and heavy equipment, do their best to battle the encroachment of the very plant their predecessors helped propagate. Yet, one homespun alternative today is making the best of this battle with a delicious twist: The edible berries, squeezed and

Jelly

Ruby red and berry sweet, jelly or jam made from the ripe berries of autumn olive has a flavor comparable to cherry jam.

mashed, can be transformed into jam and jelly. If discarded properly, the seeds will cease to live on to invade other lands.

Department of Natural Resources mine inspector Clay Kolar said he knew the fruits of autumn olive were edible for humans. But for years he never bothered to sample the berries he saw ripening in autumn around southern Illinois—including old mine lands he visited.

One day he popped a few berries into his mouth.

"They're tart, but not super tart," Kolar described the flavor, adding that it was surprisingly good. Among the edible plants and berries outdoorsmen collect, autumn olive became his sudden favorite.

"I've had plenty of persimmons that I've spit out," Kolar chuckled, "but I've never spit out a handful of autumn olive berries."

After discovering the value of all of those berries just a few years ago, Kolar now goes out of his way after work to collect what used to be an overlooked—or outright disparaged—source of sweetness.

"It makes an amazing jelly," he boasted. "And it's so easy. There are so many berries on so many bushes, you can collect all you want in just a matter of minutes."

The ruby-colored jelly is reminiscent of cherry and plum preserves. It's made by following package directions on such fruit pectin brands as Sure-Jell. ("I use the recipe they list for sour-cherry jelly," Kolar added.)

As with many other fruit preserves, making jams and jellies out of autumn olive berries is basically a matter of mashing the fruit to extract juice, removing the seeds and boiling the extract with added sugar and pectin.

Pour the thickened liquid into canning jars and you're done.

Collecting the abundant autumn olive berries, which occur in the central and southern regions of Illinois, can be done by hand or by shaking branches and allowing berries to fall onto a sheet below. It is legal to collect edible nuts, berries and fungi in state parks, conservation areas, fish and wildlife areas as well as other public lands managed by the Department of Natural Resources. Collecting is not allowed within Illinois nature preserves. (Nature preserves might be individual properties or designated portions within state parks or other sites. Therefore, a portion—but not all—of a state park might be open for collecting while a different portion is not.)

Although yellow-green berries appear on autumn olive bushes by midsummer, the fruits don't ripen until autumn.

Additionally, individual sites might be closed to collecting while hunting programs are active. Spring morel mushroom hunters, for example, know that it is against the law to hunt for mushrooms in state parks until 1 p.m. daily, the time when wild turkey hunting ceases. Always check site-specific regulations before collecting.

(Photo by Adele Hodde)

Late autumn can be the ideal time to find the sweetest autumn olive berries. Do not confuse the red, rough-speckled berries of autumn olive with the red, smooth-skinned berries of bush honeysuckle.