

From Aunt Olivia's kitchen

Blueberries, blackberries & beachplums

by Lydia Lovell

Once again the pages of the calendar turn and bring us to the season for harvesting. If there is another time of year so rich in satisfactions, so rewarding to those who have sown and weeded and tended their gardens, I can't imagine when it can be. Even for those who neglected the siren songs of spring and left their plots unplanted, nature provides reapings.

Well within the memory of middle-aged Cape Codders, gathering berries was commonplace. Those woodlands we wandered to find blueberries must have belonged to someone, yet we gave no thought of ownership to the acres of land we coursed to fill first cups and then our pails with blueberries. Nor were we troubled by fears of proprietors who, had they come upon us, would have passed the time of day and made no mention of trespass. We did no harm. Had we not picked the fruit, birds would have taken them. Nobody objected to our berry-picking.

And in the fields where we followed fence rows (or long straight, raised mounds on the surface of the ground where fences once had stood), we picked from trailing bramble vines blackberries like miniature bunches of grapes no bigger than your thumb, black as coal, and glistening in the sunlight. Inside thinnest of berryskins, ready to burst sweetly to the slightest pressure of tongue, waited their juice. Scratches from thorny vines and nearly indelible finger-stains were small prices to pay for such delicacies.

In one corner of the field where all that remained of an ancient barn were the stones of its foundation, grew beachplum bushes. Some years the cherry-sized fruit was abundant; other years, non existent...depending upon the weather early in May when the plant's snowy-white blossoms appeared on its twiggy black-barked branches. If the days had been fine and the bees could work, we found beachplums.

Whatever our harvest, we took all we needed and carried our full pails home to Aunt Olivia. She welcomed us with cries of joy even though our gifts meant long hours at her stove in August's heat. Wild berries (unless frozen) cannot boast of keeping-qualities.

From blueberries came pies, muffins, syrup, jam, and more. Blackberries made good puddings, flummery, and



wine. Beachplums were used for one purpose and one purpose only. Anyone who attempted to use beachplums for any other purpose needed his head examined. Except for making beachplum jelly, the nuggets were, are, and always will be sour, tough, and useless.

When Aunt Olivia made apple pies, she always made enough pastry for one two-crust pie and a few turnovers; when she sent us out for blueberries, nothing but a full quart would do because she needed to fill a good deep pie plate, and she wanted plenty left over for muffins, blueberry duff, or steamed pudding. **Blueberry Pie** begins with a light and flaky crust.

1/2 lb. lard
1/2 C. hot water
1 t. sugar

1 T. salt
3 C. flour
1 t. lemon juice

Place lard in a medium bowl; add water gradually while creaming with electric beater. Add dry ingredients, cutting in with two knives; sprinkle with lemon juice, continuing to cut in until dough cleans the bowl and forms a ball. Do not overmix. Chill before using.

Divide dough in two. On a floured board, roll out no thinner than 1/16"; handle only as much as necessary. Place bottom crust in deep pie plate and trim edges. In a small bowl, combine a cup of sugar and 2 t. flour. Before putting in any berries, sprinkle about half the sugar mixture over the bottom crust. Now add an ample cup of berries and sprinkle with half the remaining sugar mixture. Fill pie with another cup or more of berries and spread rest of sugar mixture over top. Just before putting on the top crust, cut a good inch or so from a stick of butter, cut it into small cubes the size of a fat blueberry, and scatter over the berries. Put on the top crust, slash so steam can escape and some of the juice bubbles up through the vents, seal the edges, and bake at 375° for one hour.

Remaining pastry, rolled thin, spread with butter, dusted with sugar and cinnamon, rolled like a jellyroll, cut into bite-size portions, and baked until golden and feather-light yielded delectable treats for mid-morning snacks. To please

Uncle Henry, Aunt Olivia prepared **Steamed Blueberry Pudding** with berries left over from the pie.

Begin with mixing a dumpling dough: Sift together 2 C. flour, 4 t. baking powder, and 1/2 t. salt. Gradually stir in a scant cup of milk. Set aside. In a medium saucepan, combine 2 cups, more or less, of berries with 1/2 C. water, 1/4 t. ground cloves, and 1 T. molasses. Bring to a boil and remove from heat immediately. Set aside but keep warm. Lightly grease a round shallow baking pan that fits inside your Dutch oven. Place a cake rack in the bottom of the Dutch oven, pour in enough boiling water to come to the top of the rack. Place pan on rack and pour blueberry mixture into pan. Drop dumplings by spoonfuls over berries. Cover Dutch oven, lower heat to simmer, and steam 30 minutes without removing cover. Serve hot and pass a small pitcher of heavy cream sweetened with 4 T. sugar.

Aunt Olivia made **Blackberry Flummery** especially for me because it was one of my favorite summertime desserts.

2 C. blackberries	Pinch of salt
2 C. water	3 T. cornstarch
1 C. sugar	1 T. lemon juice

Cook berries and water together until soft. Combine sugar, salt, and cornstarch; add slowly to berries, stirring constantly. Cook 5 minutes, stirring. Add lemon juice. Pour into dessert dishes and allow to cool before serving. Good warm or cold with plain or whipped cream.

Making **Beachplum Jelly** means spending as much time and effort getting ready as doing the actual work. First, you'll need a good-sized kettle to cook the plums in; then you'll need a heavy cotton bag large enough to contain all the cooked plums and juice. Unless you're a good judge of when boiling liquid is sheeting, you'll want a jelly thermometer. And you need sterilized jelly glasses and paraffin to seal them with. And finally, you'll need an old saucepan kept for the sole purpose of melting paraffin.

Once you've assembled all the paraphernalia, and have come by three or four quarts of beachplums...not overly ripe ones, the fruit should be still reddish, even a little bit yellow on one side...rinse them thoroughly and discard any that are soft, wormy, or otherwise unappetizing. In the kettle, boil plums in as little water as possible to prevent sticking. Cook until the plums are very soft.

Pre-planning is important for the next step. Ideally, the heavy cloth bag should be shaped like a funnel with the bottom coming to a point and the top opening fairly wide and equipped with a draw string for hanging. Make arrangements ahead of time to suspend the bag from a sturdy hook in such a way that the pointed end is inside — but several inches above the bottom of a deep saucepan that will collect the juice. Once the bag is in place, spoon into it the cooked plums and their juices. Allow the juice to drain through the bag into the saucepan. **DO NOT SQUEEZE THE BAG.** Let the bag hang at least 24 hours until all the juice that will have dripped into the saucepan. Discard the pulp and seeds and wash the bag so it can be used again.

Measure the juice. For each cup of juice add one cup of sugar. Boil the juice and sugar until the jelly thermometer reads 224° or until the juice "sheets." Pour into sterilized jelly glasses, cool, and seal with melted paraffin.

Aunt Olivia proved, again and again, the rule that beachplum jelly made in small quantities has better color and superior flavor than that made in large batches. Lots of work? It sure is. But there's nothing in this world that compares to hot buttered toast with a spoonful of beachplum jelly spread on top.

Bon appetit.