

in praise of

WILD berries

Take your children blackberry picking and you'll teach them a host of valuable lessons, says Sara Knight...

Autumn, still a time of longer days, of breathing the fresh air, and of celebrating the bounty of nature. Being the UK, it may not be warm and it may not be dry, but that is no reason to stay shut up indoors. If you do not get out much at any other time of the year (and you should do, because it says so in the EYFS Practice Guidance!) now is the time to give your children direct experience of their environment. The one thing you can be sure of wherever you are is that you will find blackberries to pick. These are the ultimate natural food, found in the stomachs of Neolithic man, as detailed in Richard Mabey's *Food For Free* (Collins, 2007), and we are duty-bound to initiate children into the cultural practice of picking and eating them. The NHS, at tinyurl.com/4369foe, recommends that blackberries are a part of children's diets and are recognised as everyday fruit, and autumn is the best time to do so.



Some settings worry about encouraging children to pick berries, but it is safer to teach children which berries they can eat than it is to tell them not to eat any, leaving them to experiment later on when they are less closely supervised. Children will take risks, they are pre-programmed to do so; as a species that is how we have developed and grown. As educators we have the responsibility to educate about risk management, giving children the tools with which to make judgements for themselves about their own safety. So what opportunities are there in picking wild berries to learn about risk management?

Lesson 1:

I was fortunate to have grown up in the country, and I remember going out to pick blackberries with my Grandmother and her twin sister. The first lesson you pass on to the children is which fruit they are. Not the single circle of many autumn hedgerow fruits (elder, hawthorn, crabapple, etc.), but a collection of bobbles. And they are black, or at least a very dark purple. If you don't know what to look for, do invest in Richard Mabey's aforementioned book; it is the classic text for identifying edible wild produce – and he will direct you to other less familiar fruits to consider.

Lesson 2:

The first lesson that I recall learning was that nettles grow where blackberries grow. Looking up to see the fruit leaves you vulnerable to stings at knee- and ankle-level, particularly when wearing shorts. Now I wear trousers when I go foraging. One lesson that is no longer as important is that road-side berries are polluted. The Food Standards Agency advises to avoid very busy roads, but in these days of lead-free petrol the dangers are from particulates that will wash off anyway, see tinyurl.com/3c8mxxu

findoutmore

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Lesson 3:

Blackberries grow on very prickly bushes. What is worse, the stems with the berries on are often behind long wavy ones whose duty, it seems, is to fend off pickers (it isn't, it's to spread the bush onto new ground). Now I accept that if I haven't got my arms covered I will get scratched. My choice.

Lesson 4:

Berries need to be really black to be sweet. This is less of a case of trial and error, more a case of taste and error! Some bushes have berries with big juicy bobbles, some with tighter, smaller bobbles, which often have more flavour, but the colour rule applies to both. And you can only fully learn this rule by eating them off the bush, so lesson 4a is about applying the tasting principle to berries picked high enough up the bush to be out of range of passing (urinating) dogs and away from busy roads (see above).

Lesson 5:

Blackberries stain. I defy anyone to pick the berries and not stain their fingers dark red. But the



juice will stain clothing, and is very difficult to remove, so if you pick while out on a walk it is a good idea to have some wipes to remove the juice from fingers before too much gets transferred onto clothes.

Lesson 6:

Picking pots fall over, particularly in long grass. If you hold them in your hands they will tip as you stretch. If you pick into bags they will squash. I now pick into wide bottomed plastic containers with tight-fitting lids that I can pop into my rucksack when full. This also ensures that I do not over-pick, leaving some (the dropped ones) for the mice, and some (the high ones) for the birds, and some for the next pickers.

Lesson 7:

Even blackberries are seasonal. The old saw has it that you should not pick after All Hallows Eve (Halloween), as that night the Devil flies over the bushes and the fruit turn sour. Whatever your beliefs, at some point in early November the fruits do become less palatable, so then you will need to turn to other, later fruits.

Here are seven good learning experiences out of one foraging expedition, and mostly transferrable skills that will be useful to the children again and again. How else will our children learn these skills for the future? Now you have an abundance of riches to turn into

TIP

If you need further educational justification, you can describe these activities as 'Education for Sustainable Development'. These and similar activities are the building blocks of children's engagement with and concern for their environment, a crucial step towards global kinship. You will have also given the children opportunities for fresh air, for stretching and bending, for improving manual dexterity, and for improving their diet.

tasty dishes – if you have cooking facilities you can make crumbles, pies, jellies and jams. Even if you do not, the fruit can be washed and eaten with yoghurt, set in jelly, or pressed through sieves to make juice. By the time the berries have been consumed, the children will know what blackberries are in a deeper and more lasting way than could ever be possible without that intimate engagement with the whole process from bush to tummy.

