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# LIVING

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For some people, the natural world is an intimidating place. This can be especially true at Halloween, when children's imaginations slip into overdrive as leafless trees take on sinister forms and the fall winds howl, scattering leaves in all directions. Even some adults may feel discomfort by a walk in the woods where every plant may be perceived as potentially poisonous, every insect as having a painful stinger and every sound as something suspicious.

However, by getting to know the flora and fauna of our natural areas, our woodlands soon become a refuge and a source of comfort. Not only are they infinitely beautiful and interesting, but they also offer a surprising number of edible delights.



## OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

Before going on to discuss some of the wild edibles that you can harvest and enjoy at this time of year — nature's Halloween treats — it's fun to recall a few of the evil and supernatural characteristics attributed to certain plants — nature's spooky side.

Frightening things have long been seen in plants. Heather, a low, coarse evergreen plant of Europe and the British Isles, was long linked to anyone not believing in Christianity. Because missionaries had trouble crossing heathlands to spread the word of God, back country people were referred to as "heathens," unprotected by the salvation of the church.

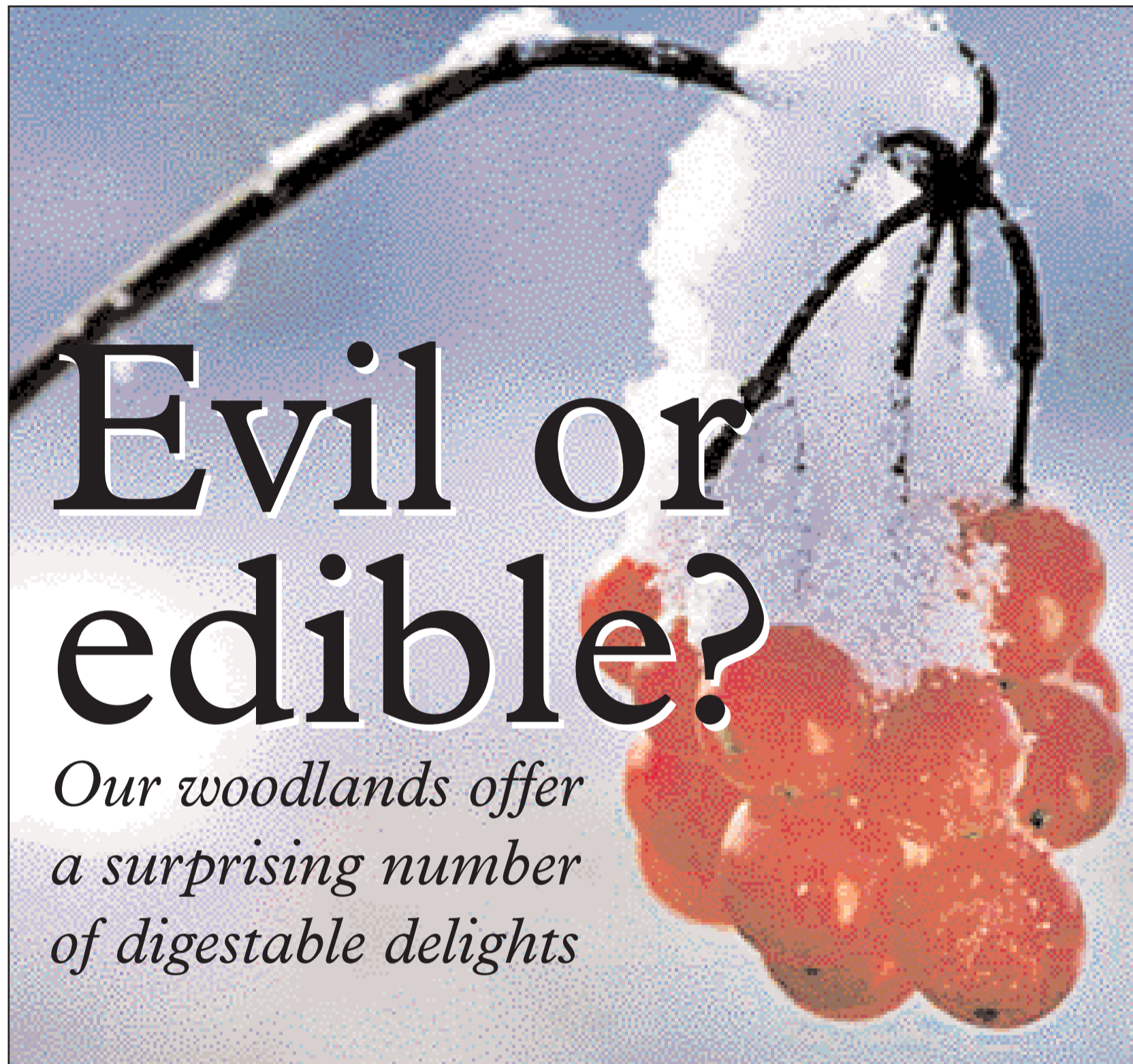
Wood anemones were once a symbol of illness in parts of Europe, and people would hold their breath and run fast if they came across a patch of these flowers. Wood betony, on the other hand, was believed to drive away evil spirits and was even planted in graveyards. Garlic was the plant of choice to keep werewolves away.

Before eating any wild plant, it's important to identify it with certainty. This is particularly so for mushrooms. Strangely enough, certain portions of plants can be edible while others are toxic. When it comes to noxious plants in the Kawarthas, some of the more familiar species include baneberry (fruit), buckthorn (fruit), buttercup (whole plant), jack-in-the-pulpit (whole plant), bloodroot (whole plant) and, of course, poison ivy. Poison oak does not grow in Ontario.

One of the best-known wild edible plants in North America is wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*). It is most common in woodlands on the Shield and is immediately recognizable with its glossy, leathery leaves and bright scarlet fruits. As its name suggests, the plant tastes strongly of wintergreen. The berries can be eaten raw, and have a sweet and refreshing flavour. The leaves can be used as a sort of chewing gum or to make tea. They should be torn into small pieces to provide the most flavour. Boil the water first, add the leaves and then let them steep. You can make an even tastier tea by taking the leaves home, cutting them into small pieces and drying them in the oven. Your house will have a delightful aroma of wintergreen. The shredded leaves can be stored in ziplock bags to keep them fresh.

Many other native plants also make excellent infusions. A favourite tea of lumbermen was prepared by taking young hemlock needles and steeping them in a pot of hot water for about 10 minutes. The eastern hemlock is one of our most beautiful and majestic forest trees.

An excellent beverage can also be obtained from the berries of the staghorn sumac. Sumacs belong to a large tropical family of plants. They have certainly maintained a tropical appearance with their palm-like leaves which turn such vivid colours in the fall. All winter long, this species can be identified at a glance by the pinnacles of fruit, matted together by tiny red hairs. Native people and early settlers used the sour taste of the fruit to their advantage by using it to make a cooling drink. To make your own sumac lemonade, pick a couple of handfuls of the fruit, being careful to discard any berries that have gone dark. Crush the berries well with a large, wooden spoon. Cover them with boil-



*Our woodlands offer a surprising number of digestible delights*

Highbush-cranberry (above) and shaggy-mane mushroom.

Terry Carpenter, special to The Examiner

ing water and allow the concoction to steep until the liquid becomes well coloured. Add sugar and serve cold.

Another edible plant that can be harvested at this time of year is the watercress (*Nasturtium officinale*). It has dark, shiny green leaves and grows in the running water of brooks and streams. Although it is rooted, watercress appears to almost float on the surface of the water. The fleshy, succulent leaves have a pungent taste and can be eaten raw, right on the stream bank. Watercress is also popular in salads or as a cooked vegetable. When you are gathering watercress, just pinch off the greens on the surface. Do not pull up the whole plant.

Once the leaves have fallen in late October, another tree still holding berries becomes quite visible. The bright orange-red berries of the American highbush-cranberry (*Viburnum trilobum*) hang from small trees in wet areas. The name comes from the fruit's resemblance to the bog cranberry. Highbush-cranberry fruits are too tart to be eaten raw, but make an excellent jelly. The jelly is equal in flavour to that of the true wild cranberry (*Vaccinium macrocarpum*). Be careful, however, to make sure that you're not gathering the fruit of the European highbush-cranberry (*Viburnum opulus*), a non-native look-a-like with an extremely tart taste.

Mushrooms are, without a doubt, among the most delicious of wild foods. For the novice, there are two easy-to-identify species that taste great and are hard to confuse with any other fungi. They are the giant puffball (*Calvatia gigantea*) and the shaggy mane (*Coprinus comatus*). Giant puffballs grow directly on the ground without a stalk. They can be the size of a football or larger. Puffballs should be picked

when the flesh is pure white. Shaggy manes, too, are familiar fall mushrooms that look like their namesake. As they grow old, however, they dissolve into a black, inky liquid. For eating purposes, only young ones should be gathered. Like giant puffballs, shaggy manes can be sauteed in butter with a touch of salt, pepper and garlic. There are many books of wild mushroom recipes available.

Foraging for wild edibles is a way to relearn some of the traditional ways of our native peoples, early settlers and woodsmen. Gathering these plants is also a reward in its own right, as you spend a day in the field roaming the woods and learning the names and key features of our flora.

## What to watch for this week

As the nights get colder, the surface water of our lakes is cooling down to the same temperature (4 C) as the uniformly cold deeper water below. No longer does a lake function as two separate lakes, with a warm lake on top of a cold one without any mixing. Wave action can now thoroughly mix and oxygenate the entire lake, just as in the spring. This phenomenon is called the fall turnover. Watch for dead weeds and other debris from the lake bottom coming to the surface.

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