

EATING ACORNS?

Researched and tested by Olen Soifer, January 28, 2007

Have you ever cracked open a fat acorn and popped it in your mouth because it looked like a nut? I have! I'll bet you spit it out just as quickly as I did!. A few kinds of acorns are good to eat right from the tree, but most raw acorns are very bitter because they contain chemicals called "tannins", used to make leather from animal hide. Tannins are also the chemicals that make many South Jersey stream waters tea colored. However, because tannins easily dissolved in hot or cold water, they are easy to remove from the acorns. Once treated, acorns are a tasty, nutritious food. Acorns are high in Potassium, are rich in complex carbohydrates and have less fat than most nuts. Plus, at least 1 / 4 of the fat that is present is "monounsaturated", which is "good" fat. Why don't you gather some acorns (if the squirrels haven't gotten them all)? Your parents can help you treat them to make them good to eat

There are two main kinds of oak trees. One is the White Oak group and the other is the Red or Black Oak group. We have both kinds here are The Woodlands. But, luckily, most of our oak trees are White Oaks and they are the biggest oaks here. That's good, because White Oak acorns have much less tannins than the others. You can get the bitter taste out of any acorns, but it takes less time with White Oak acorns.

How do you tell one acorn from another? White Oak acorns around here are usually shorter and fatter than the others. But it is not always easy to tell one acorn from another just by the shape. There are a couple of other things to remember: First of all, White Oak acorns almost always come out of the cap at the base of the acorn very easily when ripe. A lot of the time, when you pick them up, the cap is already off of them. Secondly, shelled White Oak acorns are a beige, almost white, color and the inside of the shell is smooth...while Black Oak acorns are more yellow and the inside of the shell is fuzzy. But you can't tell until you crack them open.

It is best to identify the trees by their leaves. Black oak leaves are pointy. Oaks in the White Oak group are rounded and, if the leaves have fingers (called "lobes"), they are rounded too. Also, a lot of dead White Oak leaves stay on the trees until spring, but most Black Oak leaves fall off after they turn brown. So, a good way to find the right kind of acorns is to look for them under the right kind of tree! *And, of course, it is best to gather acorns right after they fall from the tree...before the squirrels grab the fattest ones, or insects get to them.*

The Indians used to put the shelled acorns in a basket set in a running stream to remove the tannins. We don't have a handy clean stream and the bitter taste can be removed quicker by boiling them in water. Even though the water still has to be changed several times, it is quicker than cold soaking. Just shell the acorns and discard any that are moldy, dusty, brown, dried out or have insect holes. Then, cut them in half and boil them for 15 minutes. When the water looks like tea, pour it off and do it again. Do this until the water stays clear brown. It will take about 3 water changes, and up to a couple of hours, to get all the tannins out. Black Oak acorns take more changes of water (and time). When you are done cooking the acorns, they will be a rich, medium brown color.

Next, roast the acorns in a single layer on a cookie sheet in a 300-350 degree oven for about an hour. Sprinkle them with a little salt, if you want, and eat them right out of the oven. Or use them, chopped, in any recipe that calls for nuts. You can use any recipe for sugaring nuts and they take good that way too. If you grind them up in a blender, they can be used to replace up to 1 / 2 of the wheat flour in baking recipes.

If you only want unroasted acorn meal, to use like flour in baking, it is fairly quick and easy to use cold running water to "leach" out the bitter tannins. Ask mom or dad for help. Here is what you do:

PREPARATION OF GROUND, UNROASTED, ACORN MEAL

1. Pick up several cupfuls of acorns. All kinds of oaks have edible acorns. Some have more tannin than others, but leaching will remove the tannin from all of them. White Oak acorns have somewhat less tannins than Red/Black acorns.

2. Shell the acorns with a nutcracker or a hammer. Discard any pieces that are dark brown.
3. Grind them fine in a food processor. You can also use a blender by putting the shelled acorns in the blender, filling with water, and grinding at high speed for a minute or two. You will get a thick, cream-colored paste that looks yummy, but tastes terrible.
4. Leach (wash) them. Line a big sieve or colander with a dishtowel and pour in the ground acorns. Hold the sieve under a faucet and slowly pour water through, stirring with one hand, for about five minutes. A lot of creamy stuff will come out. This is the tannin. When the water runs clear, stop and taste a little. When the meal is not bitter, you have washed it enough.

Twist the dishtowel and squeeze out as much water as you can, with your hands.

Use the ground acorn mash right away, because it turns dark when it is left around. Or store in plastic for freezing if you want to make the pancakes later.

RECIPES:

Whole Roasted Acorns can be candied or salted and eaten as a snack.

Ground roasted acorns can replace 1 / 3 to 1 / 2 of the flour or corn meal in a recipe

Try adding whole acorns to stuffing in place of chestnuts

ACORN PANCAKES from Sharon Hendricks

Break an egg into a bowl. Add:

1 teaspoon salad oil

1 teaspoon of honey or sugar

1/2 cup of ground and leached unroasted acorn mash

1/2 cup of corn meal

1/2 cup of whole wheat or white flour

2 teaspoons of double action baking powder

1/2 teaspoon of salt

1/2 cup of milk

Beak everything together. If the batter is too thick to pour, thin it with milk. Pour pancakes into a hot, greased griddle and cook slowly until brown on both sides. Serve with butter and syrup. Delicious!

More Wild Food Right in the Neighborhood

You could serve this meal right from food found on The Woodlands property: Wild Dandelion Salad; Fried Bass, Sunfish or Frogs Legs; Roast Goose or Duck; Squirrel Stew; Sautéed Poke Shoots with Sliced Puffballs, seasoned with Wild Garlic; Acorn Bread; Wild Grape, Strawberry or Cherry Tarts topped with Candied Acorns; Iced Wild Herbal Tea and Hot Dandelion beverage (a coffee substitute).

Now, remember...we don't allow hunting on our property. Plus, it takes practice to learn what you can eat, and when you can eat it. Or, you might need to know how to prepare it...such with acorns. Some plants are completely OK to eat, but others are only good when young. Sometime one part can be eaten, but another part is poisonous. There are some plants that are NOT good to eat, or even poisonous, that look like a another plant that is good to eat. So, don't eat anything unless you learn that is it OK from an expert. But, learning about wild foods makes walking around very interesting and fun. Do some searches on the Internet or get some books about wild foods from the library. You will be surprised about the groceries that grow right in your own back yard!