

Hoquiam Farmer's Market News - Blackberry Edition

Local News

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We need to talk. It has come to my attention that there are human beings living in Grays Harbor who are woefully uninformed about the various types of Blackberries that grow here. I'm not pointing fingers, nor assigning blame. This is a situation can be easily remedied, and I am here to help. Little Wild Blackberry Season begins this weekend. In order to assimilate as a true citizen of the Pacific Northwest, one simply must be properly educated about Blackberries. Otherwise you risk looks of scorn and pity when you show up at a potluck bearing a cobbler made with, gasp, Himalayan Blackberries. So here is the lowdown on Blackberries. Number one berry and the only Blackberry ever to be used in baking pies, cobblers, and jam- the coveted Little Wild Blackberry. How does one identify this particular species? Well, first of all, it is 'little'. This is not your common hedge variety ginormous blackberry that any casual picker can easily find in late summer. No sirree, this little berry is wily, elusive, and cunning. The LWB is usually ripening in late June or early July, but this year the weather gods have not been kind, so the season is late. Unlike the large Himalayan and Evergreen blackberries, the LWB must have cross pollination in order to bear fruit. Last year our Spring was so cold and wet that the bees stay huddled in the warmth of their hives when the LWB blossoms were out. Because of that factor (lazy bee syndrom) we had zero LWB's last summer.

The LWB grows along the ground, hoping to go unnoticed. It grows over stumps, and it loves twining itself over brush piles in logged areas. The reason it loves the brush piles? It knows that you will espy the berries, come slashing your way through dangerous undergrowth, clamber up on the brush pile with a trembling outstretched hand- and that's when you'll hear the cracking of dry wood. Next thing you know you've sunk four feet into the brush pile and have been raked by every pointy part of a tree limb on your mad descent. Which is why the seasoned Little Wild Blackberry picker never, ever wears shorts or short sleeved shirts when suiting up for the berry expedition. Consider your wardrobe with great care, the future of your skin depends upon it. Heavy jeans, a cotton turtleneck, and sturdy leather boots are required. I recommend that you use duct tape on the jeans around your ankles and add a canvas vest to the ensemble. Your hands are at high risk, so sacrifice a pair of work gloves by cutting the fingers off halfway. Your fingers need to be nimble in order to ease the small berries from the vine. Even a pair of food handler gloves will save some pain. I must confess that I have occasionally come upon a LWB patch without the proper clothing. When the hot water from my evening shower hit the wounds, my cries of anguish could be heard several blocks away. I bear the scars proudly, knowing that other intrepid berry pickers will know in a glance that I could not turn away from a bountiful pick. Everyone else assumed that a terrible accident was to blame. Now the equipment needed to pick. The girly side of me yearns to take a cute woven wicker basket for picking, but this is an unrealistic fantasy. Using any container with a large open top is a disaster waiting to happen. Remember that painful fall into the brush pile? Every berry in your adorable basket would be lost to you. That way lies madness. Many a tear has been wept over spilt LWB's. No, what you need is something cheap and sturdy. Being a conscientious recycler, you'll have to start saving your gallon plastic milk jugs. Not to worry, they can be added to the recycling bin when the

season is past. For now, you can make good use of them. Next, locate your box cutter. Near the top of the jug, cut out a slot just large enough for your dainty hands to insert the precious berries. You now have a guilt free container with a reliable handle. Oh, keep the lid screwed in place- the fewer routes for escaping berries, the happier you'll be. Now that we all have cell phones, be sure to bring it along. A few years ago I was trapped for what felt like hours in deep jungle-like brush. The elderberry and salmonberry bushes were several feet over my head and I was crawling over ankle breaking logs trying to escape. No cell phone, my only comforting thought was that someone would eventually spot my car on the logging road. My other mistake that awful day- I hadn't told my husband where I was going to pick! Yes, I hang my head in shame, but I learned a valuable lesson. I also learned that I hadn't packed enough toilet paper in my fanny pack. Luckily for me, thimbleberry leaves were very close at hand.