

Nature's bounty - Saskatoons and chokecherries

When I'm feeling nostalgic and want a special dessert or jam, I reach back symbolically in my mind, and literally in my fridge or pantry, for a concoction made of Saskatoons or chokecherries. I think my German Russian ancestors would approve, as both berries were staples in their winter diet after they came to Canada.

The Latin name of the Saskatoon berry is *Amelanchier alnifolia*, but that did not really interest us. In school we learned that the Indigenous people made something called pemican, a dried mixture of buffalo meat and berries that kept very well. When others called it "service berry", we just assumed they meant a different berry. It's widespread across the Canadian and American prairies and prefers undisturbed soil, though more recently it has been domesticated and can be found in many backyards, including mine. When my cousins and I were in Kiel, Germany to visit newly found relatives, we even found a Saskatoon bush in front of their apartment building. They were quite surprised that the berries were edible. Even a casual internet search will give you plenty of information about growing them.

When I was growing up in west central Saskatchewan in the 1940s and 50s, Saskatoons were a regular part of our diet, especially the canned ones in winter, but first we have to get those precious berries. It was always an excursion my siblings and I (when I was old enough) looked forward to. Though it was work, it meant an outing and getting away for a day to see different scenery.

There must have been an informal network to spread the word that the berries were ready, that is, a dark wine colour, usually near the beginning of July. When the big day came, we hurried through our morning chores and breakfast. Mom and my older sisters made the picnic lunches and lemonade, and gathered small buckets – often empty Rogers Golden syrup cans - and cleaned five-gallon cream cans. We also needed belts or some way of tying those cans to our bodies to make the picking more efficient. Because we were in bush, long pants and long sleeves were the order of the day.

When everything and everyone was ready, we piled into the back of the farm truck – no such thing as a seatbelt for everyone – and headed north to Senlac (thirty-five or forty miles) where there was more bush than in our area. Then the search was on and it might take several stops to find a good patch, preferably one that had not already been picked. If the weather had been reasonably moist, the berries would be quite big. There must have been mosquitoes, but they don't play a big part in my recollections, even if Deet had not yet been invented.

Of course, it was assumed that you would eat the biggest berries before they hit your bucket, but once you had your fill, the bucket filled up too. You were also warned that if you horsed around too much instead of staying with the picking, you'd have to stay home next year and muck the barn! Invariably there were races to see who could fill a bucket first. You had to be careful not to trip on the uneven ground and spill your berries before you had a chance to transfer them to the cream cans. At noon there'd be a break to eat bologna sandwiches, homemade cookies and the berries with cream and sugar. When all the cream cans were full, or when time ran out, a tired crew would head home.

In some ways, the real work commenced the next day. Those berries had to be sorted to take out the ones that were wormy or had bright orange growths on them, a tedious job indeed. Then the berries were washed and the

canning process began. The two-quart jars had to be sterilized before they were filled with berries and syrup made of water and sugar. The lids also had to be checked and sterilized before the jars were placed in the canning kettle. The fire in a coal and wood stove for the hours of processing was not very welcome on a hot July day. In a good year we would can over a hundred quarts of berries, but rumour had it that some families canned over two hundred quarts. We also made jam with some of the berries, and some people made jelly as well. In our family, my younger brother teased Mom that she used one berry per stalk of rhubarb to make jam. Some years that was truer than others, depending on how many berries we found.

The reward for the hard work came when those jars were opened in fall and winter. Housewives were inventive, sometimes with the help of the recipes from the women's pages in *The Western Producer* or other farm papers. Most of the berries were eaten just as they came from the jar, probably with fresh cream, but some also became pies and were used as the fruit on Kuchen, a bread-based pastry that was a German Russian specialty. Once we got electricity, the berries were frozen, but when I had my own bushes, I quickly learned that the berries were better if they were cooked before they were frozen. Love for Saskatoons has not diminished, though Saskatoon farms or a market might now be the source.

The other berry that was important in our family, but not in all families, was the chokecherry. I always wondered why it had that name. Was it because of the big stone with just a little pulp around it or did someone choke on one? The Latin name is *Prunus virginiana*. We did not have to drive as far to get chokecherries and they came later in the summer. When they were a dark wine colour, you knew they were ready. They were also easier to pick and sort than Saskatoons, but the effort after that was greater. To me it was always worth it because of the flavour you got out of those berries – better than any other wild berry in my books!

Once the berries were washed, we put them into a big kettle with a little water and slowly steamed them till they were very soft. After this, some women placed them in a jelly bag and just followed the jelly instructions in the Certo pectin package, taking care to sterilize jars, etc. However, Mom also liked to make jam, usually with some apples or rhubarb added to “stretch” the chokecherries, and that meant getting rid of the stones. That's where the hard work came in. The berries were poured into the upside - down cone of a food press and the cone-shaped wooden stomper was used to press the berries so the pulp came off. After that, jam and/or syrup making proceeded as usual.

We also used the berries as canned fruit. What, you say, with all those stones? The fruit was usually served on a Sunday when there was time to sort it all out and relish the flavour. And then there was the time we accidentally used chokecherries instead of Saskatoons on a Kuchen. Not a good idea! When the two berries are frozen, you can't tell the difference unless you taste them, so that was a forgivable mistake. When I went hiking in the Rockies, I made chokecherry “leather” by drying the sweetened pulp. It certainly was a unique snack. More recently some people also made wine but no one was that sophisticated when I was growing up.

Though this is a trip back in memory lane, the story of nature's bounty does not end. It's still possible to find wild Saskatoons or pick the domestic ones, or just buy them at the market. Chokecherries are still abundant if you know where to look. It's a shame to waste such a gift.