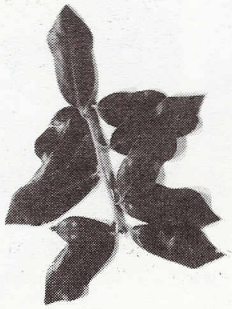
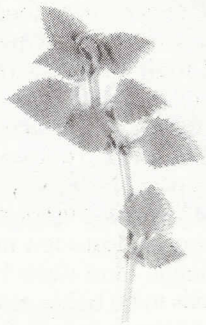
NATIVE WILD FOODS: Wild Beverages

by Dick Deuerling and Peggy Lantz

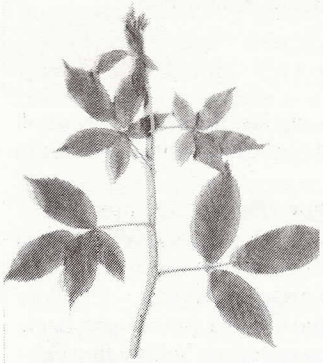
Tired of coffee? Too much caffeine? Why not try making your own teas and coffee from wild plants? You can brighten your day and sweeten your palate with a new taste treat by doing it yourself! Hollies, wild mints, the persimmon tree, and even goldenrod brew up interesting and delightful teas.



American holly



Mint



Blackberry

Hollies

The various species of holly leaves must be dried and then roasted until golden brown before steeping. Hollies and the four "coffees" described are the only ones that require roasting to finish the drying process.

Yaupon, *Ilex vomitoria*, has the highest caffeine content of any North American plant. It was the source of the Indians' infamous "black drink", which they prepared by boiling it to excess, and then they drank it to excess, causing—true to its botanical name—all manner of ill after-effects. It makes a good tea if the leaves are steeped for just six or seven minutes without boiling them, but don't use yaupon if you're trying to brew a non-caffeinated drink.

Three other hollies make good tea without the caffeine: Dahoon holly *(Ilex cassine)*, American holly *(Ilex opaca)*, and Gallberry *(Ilex glabra)*. Prepare them all by drying them, then roasting them in a slow oven until golden brown, then steeping them in boiling water.

Mints

All the rest of the teas described here are dried for brewing and storing. Some of the mint leaves can also be used fresh. Use two teaspoons to make a cup of tea from fresh leaves, and one if the leaves are dried. Any plant that smells like mint when crushed and has a square stem is acceptable for making tea (all mints have a square stem, but not all square-stemmed plants are mints, so use both tests).

You know two of the best: spearmint *(Mentha spicata)* and peppermint *(M. piperita)*. Others are good, too: *Micromeria brownei*, henbit *(Lamium amplexicaule)*, ground ivy, also called gill-over-the-ground *(Glechoma hederacea)*, pennyroyal *(Hedeoma pulegioides)*. False pennyroyal *(Piloblephis rigida)* is a woody mint; you can brew leaves and blossoms and stems, too.

Goldenrod tea

One variety of even the notorious goldenrod can be used for tea. The species is called sweet goldenrod *(Solidago odora)* and only this one out of about 25 in Florida makes a good tea. It can be recognized because its leaves have translucent spots on them, and when crushed they smell like anise.

Violet tea

The leaves of all the native violets *(Viola* spp.) (but not African violets) make good tea. (You can also use the leaves fresh in salads or cooked like spinach.)

Blackberry tea

The leaves of all the various blackberry and dewberry types *(Rubus* spp.) are good for tea, and also can be used medicinally for relieving diarrhea.

MAKING TEA from WILD PLANTS

Teas can be made from the leaves of many different plants. The leaves should be picked when mature—not too young and not too old. Some can be used fresh, but most should—and all can—be dried before using, and can be stored in a dark place in tightly capped jars. Dick stores his jars in a box on the back shelf of the pantry.

To prepare, wash the leaves, spread them out on cookie sheets, and set them in the oven. If you have a gas oven, just leave on the pilot light and crack the door open with a pencil to let out the moisture. If you have an electric range with an oven light that stays on when the door is open, the light may provide enough warmth to dry the leaves. Again, open the door a crack for air circulation. Leave them overnight, or until they will crumble dryly in your fingers.

You can also lay them on newspapers and cover them with a newspaper, then put them on the back shelf of your car while it sits in the sun. Open the window a crack to let out moisture, and leave them there all day to dry.

Don't over-dry, or you'll lose the volatile oils that make the flavor in your tea. Properly dried leaves can be kept safely for a long time in tightly capped bottles. Improperly dried leaves can mold. Do not use moldy tea leaves.

To prepare a cup of tea, put a teaspoon of your dried leaves in a cup, or one teaspoon per cup in a pot, and add boiling water. Steep for about six minutes. Don't steep too long. The tea tastes best if you drink it right after making it, without letting it stand for any length of time.

Try the tea unsweetened, or sweeten it with sugar, honey, or saccharin until it suits your palate.

Clover tea

The dried blossom heads of some of the clovers can be used for tea: white clover *(Trifolium* spp.) and red clover *(Trifolium prayense)*. (Clovers are not native plants, but are escaped from cultivation, so take your vengeance upon them by drinking them!)

Sassafras tea

Sassafras *(Sassafras albidum)* tea is made from the boiled bark of the roots. Dried crushed leaves are the "filet gumbo" in Cajun cooking. You can make a similar-tasting tea out of the roots of camphor trees *(Cinnamonum camphora)*, too, but it's not as good.

Persimmon tea

Persimmon *(Diospyros virginiana)* tea, made from the dried leaves of the persimmon tree, also tastes similar to sassafras.

Sumac lemonade

Sumac *(Rhus* spp. *Rhus copallina* is the species most often encountered in Florida.) makes a drink that tastes something like lemonade. Don't be afraid of collecting poison *sumac, Rhus verni*, by mistake, for the poisonous variety has white or greenish berries, and the flower cluster comes from the laterals rather than the terminals. Drinkable sumac has blossoms on the ends of the branches and red berries, and all varieties of sumac with red berries are good to use. After berries develop and become red, harvest before it rains. A hard rain will wash off the coating of malic acid (contained in the juice of apples, too) which gives it the flavor for the drink. Don't wash the berries, either, for the same reason. Fill a container with enough warm water (not hot, because the berry contains bitter tannin which would be released in boiling water) to cover the berries, and mash them with a potato masher or rub them together with your hands. Strain the juice through a pillowcase, muslin bag, or coffee filter to remove the tiny hairs. Just hang the bag over a pitcher and pour the juice through it. (Then plant the seeds. You haven't hurt them because you didn't use hot water.) Sweeten the drink with honey or sugar.

Rosehip tea

If you have any roses around—wild or cultivated *(Rosa* spp.)—the fruits, called rosehips, make a good tea. (Be sure to avoid any cultivated roses that have been sprayed or dusted.) Pinch off the bitter blossom end, dry them, and store them whole in a jar. When you're ready for a cup of rosehip tea, put them in a blender and start and stop the blender a few times to chop the hips into bits without grinding them to mush. Then pour boiling water over a teaspoonful of them in a cup, and let steep for five or six minutes. Strain, sweeten, and drink. Rosehips are very high in vitamin C, surpassing orange juice.

Pine needle tea

Pine needles from all kinds of pine trees *(Pinus* spp.) make a different and delicious tea. It's the easiest tea to make—needs no drying. Just pick a few fresh young tender needles, cut them up into small pieces, pour boiling water over them, let steep, strain, and drink.

Yarrow tea

In the northern part of the state, you can make tea from the leaves of yarrow *(Achillea millefolium)*. Dry them and steep them as described, but use a little less than one teaspoon per cup.

Persimmon

Sumac

Slash pine

Mexican tea

Mexican tea, also called wormseed *(Chenopodium ambrosioides)*, is not my favorite, but packages of leaves can be found for sale in markets in the southwest part of the U.S.

Elderberry tea

Elderberry *(Sambucus canadensis)*, written up in a previous issue of *The Palmetto*, (Spring, 1989), offers three fantastic drinks: elderberry wine from the berries, and both tea and champagne from the blossoms (see box for champagne instructions).

Basswood blossom tea

Basswood *(Tilia americana)* blossoms, picked and brewed fresh, make a delicate tea. Ground-up fruits and blossoms, crushed in a mortar and pestle, make a chocolate substitute (it must be used immediately, for it does not keep). The blossoms can be dried and stored in capped bottles for future use, too. Basswood nuts are good to eat out of hand. Put the whole nut in your mouth and crack the cover with your teeth, eat the kernel and spit out the cover. The sap of the basswood tree is sweet, and can be tapped and boiled down to syrup, like the sap of the maple tree.

Coffees

Coffee substitutes can be made from the root-nuts of chufa, also called yellow nut grass, *(Cyperus esculentus*, an Old World native plant) persimmon seeds, dandelion roots *(Taraxacum officinale*, from Eurasia), or chicory roots *(Cichorium intybus)*. Roast them until they are brown clear through and will crack in your hand, then grind in the blender or coffee grinder to the same coarseness as your regular coffee. *Do not overbrew!*

Candy

If you have some left-over mint leaves, clover blossoms, or violets after you've dried all the tea leaves you want, make candy. Wash the leaves or blossoms and pat them dry. Separate an egg and beat the white a little, paint the whites on the fresh leaves or blossoms, then sprinkle them with granulated sugar. Turn the pieces over, clean up the sugar that fell off, and sprinkle again, until the egg white won't hold any more. Let dry, and refrigerate or freeze.

Dick Deuerling provides the wild refreshments for every meeting of Central Florida's Tarflower Chapter.

CHAMPAGNE
from ELDER BLOSSOMS

Ingredients: Sugar, 3 1/2 cups
Lemon, 2 small or 1 large
Elder blossoms, 4 or 5 large umbels in full bloom
Vinegar (white), 2 tablespoons
Water (cold), 5 liters
Equipment: A large crock, jug, or glass bowl (large enough to hold about 6 liters)
5 clean, 1-liter, screw-top bottles
Method: In the large crock, dissolve the sugar in a small amount of warm water and *let cool*. Wash and cut the lemon in half, squeeze juice into sugar solution, then cut the rind into small pieces and add to crock. Remove large stems from elder blossoms and add to crock. Now add vinegar and cold water. Mix well, and let stand for 4 days to ferment, then strain through muslin (or other cloth) and bottle in screw-top bottles. Will be ready to drink in 6 to 10 days. Enjoy.