

NATIVE WILD FOODS:

You don't have to be a squirrel to enjoy the acorns!

The Oaks (*Quercus* spp.)

by Dick Deuerling, as told to Peggy Lantz

For foraging purposes, the oaks can be divided into two groups: the white oaks, and the red and black oaks.

Those in the white oak group provide the best eating because the acorns are sweet, not bitter. The white oaks include white oak (*Quercus alba*), live oak (*Q. virginiana*), and *Q. prinus* (or *Q. michauxii*), commonly known as swamp chestnut oak, basket oak, or cow oak. These oaks have leaves with round lobes and no prickles on the ends. They set their acorns each year, with acorn meats that are cream-colored and sweet. The inside of the shell is smooth.

The oaks in the black and red group have prickles on the tips of the leaves and take two years to make acorns. The acorn meats are more bitter, yellow to orange in color, and the inside of the shell is tomentose (hairy).

Live oak ranges throughout Florida. The white oak and swamp chestnut oak grow from Alachua County north. These three varieties can be eaten without leaching. Acorns from all oaks can be used for eating, but the tannic acids must be leached out of the black and red oak types. The turkey oak is purported to be poisonous — some hogs are reported to have died from eating turkey oak acorns — but I have tried them and I'm still alive! But they are the bitterest of the bunch. Laurel oaks are also very bitter.

The Indians had a number of ways to leach the tannin out of bitter acorns. Sometimes they put them in a basket and set the basket in a stream for a week or so. Sometimes they just buried them in a swamp, digging them up a month or two later before they started to germinate in the spring. Our method is usually to boil them, changing the water a couple times. I usually find plenty of acorns from the white oak group so I don't have to bother with the trouble of leaching, but it takes some experimenting to find the sweeter acorns.

Harvesting. When I'm ready to gather acorns (or rather, in the fall and winter when the acorns are ready for

me to gather), I have three trees picked out that I have found by experimenting are sweeter than the rest (but this year, they don't seem to be setting many acorns, so I may have to try some new trees). I gather a bucketful off the ground and tote them home. I fill the bucket with water and throw away any that float. The sinkers I dry out by putting them in a frying pan on the stove. Use a fairly hot heat, but don't roast them. Shake 'em around until they're just dry. Or you can dry them in the oven at 150 to 200 degrees for 15 minutes.

Then crack off the shells with an ordinary nut cracker, or a hammer. Discard the shells and any wormy nuts. You may end up with a quart of nutmeats, depending on the worms.

Flour. Put the nuts in the blender and grind them up. Strain them through a kitchen strainer, and reblend the larger pieces. Now you have acorn flour that you can use in any recipe. Since acorn flour has no gluten, mix it half and half with regular wheat flour to make muffins, pancakes, or quick

bread. If it's dried thoroughly, the acorn flour can be stored in tightly capped jars.

Hamburgers. Instead of grinding the nuts into a fine flour, you can chop them into pieces, or save out the larger bits after sifting the flour, to make "hamburgers".

Use 1/2 cup of coarsely ground acorns, 1 cup of water, some salt, a tablespoon of butter, one large chopped onion, and one egg.

Combine acorn meal, salt, and water in sauce pan, bring to a boil, and simmer for 15 minutes covered. Melt the butter in a skillet, add onions and cook until translucent. Then combine the onions, the egg, and the cooked acorn meal in a bowl, add salt and pepper to taste, and mix well. Mold into patties and fry on both sides just like hamburger patties. Add more butter and cover while waiting to serve on a bun with the same condiments you like on hamburgers: ketchup, mustard, relish, mayonnaise, etc. Good as leftovers, too, warmed up.

Microwave acorn candy. Sift a pound of confectioner's sugar with 1 cup acorn flour into a microwave-safe bowl. Put in 1/2 cup butter or margarine and 1/4 cup milk. Heat in the microwave oven until the butter melts (a couple of minutes), then stir until smooth. Reheat slightly if it isn't smooth. Line a tray with plastic wrap, spread the candy over the tray, and cut into squares. Don't make acorn candy if you're on a diet!

