

WILD FOOD SPECIALIST

by Peggy S. Lantz

Every Florida Native Plant Society chapter needs somebody like Dick Deuerling with the ongoing enthusiasm and knowledge that keeps a chapter alive and growing.

Every month, Dick is on the program of the Tarflower Chapter in central Florida, sharing his expertise, showing wild plants he has brought to the meeting, and providing refreshments in the form of teas, jellies, and syrups made from wild native plants.

Dick — brown from the sun and be-whiskered, and often wearing red suspenders — is a self-taught naturalist. He says he has been interested in plants since he could crawl, and has been eating wild foods for fifty years. He grew up in Pennsylvania, and still owns a farm there, but has lived in Orlando for thirty years — since he came to visit a brother and decided to stay.

Teaching came naturally, too, so Dick has shared his information and experiences with many. He has taught survival to Scout troops, and is proud that — of all the Boy Scouts that went on a cross-Florida survival tramp (carrying no food with them) with the late Ross Allen years ago — the Scout that Dick helped teach was the only one who gained weight on the 153-mile, thirteen-day hike!

Dick has given wild food programs to practically every garden club in central Florida, including addressing 400 garden clubbers at their convention at a large Orlando hotel. He's shared his pleasure in wild foods with children in public schools, and with botany students at the University of Central Florida and Stetson. One group of youngsters at the Orlando Science Center were served a porridge of Jerusalem artichokes and sandspurs — although they were not told what it was until after they had tried it, and agreed that it was good!

His schedule includes a TV broadcast with a display of edible native plants, a program for a school science club, and a presentation for the Seminole County Cooperative Extension Service. He is "retired", but very busy.

Dick will share some of his wild food expertise in a series of articles in *The Palmetto*.

NATIVE WILD FOODS: The Elderberry

(*Sambucus canadensis* or, synonymously, *S. simpsonii*)

By its Latin name, you can tell that elderberry ranges far and wide, north to Canada and west to Louisiana. The northern elderberry loses its leaves in winter, while *S. simpsonii* is evergreen, blooming and bearing fruit almost year-round. It likes dampness, growing along canals, roadside swales, and lake edges.

It is easy to recognize, growing to ten feet high, with compound leaves, 5" lacy clusters of small, white blossoms in an umbrella shape, and umbrellas of small, black berries. In Florida, you can often find blossoms, green berries, and ripe black berries on the same bush at the same time.

Both blossoms and berries provide wild-food delectables. Dick suggests picking the full head of blossoms, dipping them in batter, and frying them in deep fat. Eat them right off the stem. Or pull the blossoms off the stems and mix them in the batter before you cook them as pancakes. If you smell the delicate odor of the blossoms, you'll get an idea of the flavor that will be added to your breakfast pancakes.

Dick served a hot tea made from dried elder blossoms at the last Tarflower Chapter meeting I attended. Pick and shake the blossoms off the stems (be sure all the stems are removed because they add a rankness to the flavor) onto a cookie sheet, leave in the oven with pilot light or oven light on (but no other heat) until thoroughly dry (couple of days). Store in a closed bottle in the dark, and steep as you would any tea. Dick says tea can be made from fresh blossoms, too.

The prettiest and tastiest syrup and jelly you ever had can be made from the ripe berries. Pick a grocery bag-full of bunches of the black berries, rinse the dust off, strip the berries off the stems, and boil gently in a little water, mashing the berries as they soften. Strain through a cloth as you would any jelly. Add sugar equal to the



amount of juice and — to make syrup — boil until the sugar is dissolved. To make jelly, add a package of commercial pectin such as Sure-Jell to the juice and sugar, and follow directions on the package. (The directions will call for lemon or apple juice to add some tartness. Dick prefers it "straight", though it has to be cooked a little longer to jell.)

You've heard of elderberry pie? Make it from fresh, frozen, or reconstituted dried berries, add an equal amount of sugar, then add a tablespoon or two of both corn starch and water. Pour the mixture into a pie shell, cook, and eat.

Dick suggests this idea for more elderberry goodies: Buy refrigerator croissant rolls, flatten them into long shapes on a cookie tin, and turn up the edges (to hold in the juice). Spread on the elderberry pie mixture, and bake until golden brown and bubbly. Dick says no samples of this recipe have ever come back home from a Tarflower chapter meeting!

If you're into this hobby for the long term, try brewing some elderberry wine from the berries, or champagne from the blossoms.

Dick says wild foods has been a fascinating hobby. He'll share some more with you in the next issue of *The Palmetto*.