

Nature's Candy

From the field, farmstand and neighborhood trees: a tour of summer fruit
Published by [Metroland](#) on June 1, 2011

Summer to me is trapping the sunlike shape and flavor of peaches in jars. In the years I've missed the ritual of buying a case of peaches and turning them into jam, the season felt incomplete, like Christmas without a tree.

I am covetous of my peach preserves. They shine like gold on the shelf, full of candied and fresh ginger. I might share other jams, but I hoard the peach preserves lest the sense of luxurious provisioning disappear as we pop the last pint open in February and have to wait until August to replenish our stores.

Last year, however, I got such a deal on peaches at the Amish Produce Auction that I made enough to give away a few jars and still have plenty on the shelf. It's been nice to be able to share my most prized possession. Maybe next year I'll experiment with giving away other things I rely upon, like fingers and toes.

While peaches are my definitive fruit, there are plenty of others around here to hunt and enjoy. Whether buying from a farm or picking them from your favorite neighbor's bush or tree, the sources are many for lovely local fruit.

Farmers markets and gardens are already almost done featuring rhubarb. This year I made a great sauce just with sugar, a little vanilla bean and water. Cooked into an unattractive slush, the sauce tasted all the more stunning because it lacked loads in looks. The stuff was great on yogurt and ice cream, or all alone on a spoon. Sometimes, rhubarb lasts into strawberry season, but sometimes it doesn't, so I freeze a few stalks for the stellar, standard strawberry-rhubarb pie.

For a few years, I picked strawberries with the kids at a u-pick farm and gained a huge appreciation for the labor involved. Stooped to the ground under blistering sun, gathering strawberries is sweaty hard work. Of course the results are delicious, but these days if I want to get a lot of strawberries I look for deals on flats at farmstands. The fruit won't last and farmers know it. But don't balk at the price. Try squatting in the sun in a dusty field and see how much you want for your efforts.

In mid-June, other berries start to ripen. Take a stroll around your neighborhood. Those dark-purple, knuckle-length berries that carpet sidewalks into slick runways? Mulberries. Birds love them, which is why there are so many of them sprouting around here. The berries vary from tree to tree. Taste around until you find your favorite and then pick. Always ask the owner, of course, but likely they'll be glad that you want to help harvest this somewhat menacing fruit. My son likes mulberries raw, but I prefer them cooked into jam, pie or cobbler.

On that same neighborhood stroll, look up. Service berries, or Saskatoon berries, are often planted as street trees. Get a gardener to help you identify these trees—you don't want to pop just anything into your mouth. These small, blueberry-looking fruits hang from stems like cherries. They have little seeds inside that taste like vanilla, or maybe almondy. They are good raw but, in my opinion, great baked. The first service-berry pie of the year is as precious as any jar of peach preserves.

Service berries are tedious to harvest, and you have to be mindful that the birds don't pick a tree clean before you do. Mulberries are easier. Take a sheet, spread it under the tree and shake. You have to pick through the leaves and twigs that fall with the fruit, but hey, they're free! A gift of the sun.

My son Francis identified these sources of free fruit to me years ago. I was skeptical. Was he trying to poison us? My husband knew they were fruit—he's a tree guy by trade—so I felt safe trying them. But it was our boy who got us into taking advantage of them and making them family food.

By the Fourth of July, you should see raspberries. I am lucky enough to have access to raspberries my neighbor grows. My oldest son loves to graze on them, and sometimes we make ice cream or jam, too. I tithe back a tart when I can.

Raspberries will be at the markets too. When ripe, they do go moldy fast, so use them quickly. Don't buy your raspberries on Saturday and wait till Monday night to use them. You might be sad. Eat them fresh on your salad for dinner and in your cereal for breakfast.

All of these berries freeze well. You can put them on cookie sheets in a single layer and flash freeze them, bagging them once they're frozen. Or, if pressed for time, you can put them in bags that are not too full and pop those in the freezer. What you get once they thaw will not resemble the plumpness you stored, but the taste will still be rewarding.

You might see plums in early July. When we lived in Seattle, we had free Italian plums by the bucket. There is even a Plum Tree Park. I used to walk my now-teenaged boy there when he was a baby, fill the bottom of the stroller with free plums and go home to spend the morning slicing them for the dehydrator while he slept. Italian plums don't grow so nicely in this climate, but you can get them and other plums from orchards and farmers markets. I am not such a fan of the tart complexity of this fruit, so I can't expound on its advantages. But if you love them, they will be here soon.

Late July and early August, start looking for blueberries and early apples, perfect for pie baking, which as a food trend was predicted to continue and swell this year. As the summer winds up in vacation frenzy, ask yourself, "Am I doing my part for this cooking trend?"

Download Piccasts from KCRW's *Good Food* radio show for inspiration. Learn how to make a crust with frozen butter, shredded on a grater. Win friends and influence people with your superior lattice-work crusts at Labor Day picnics. Or wow them with your purchasing power and know-how, ferreting out the best farmers market or farmstand offerings. My favorite pie made by somebody else is from Fo'Castle Farms in Burnt Hills. What's yours?