

# Great Year for Mackinac's Juicy Wild Raspberries



## Nature Notes

By  
Patricia Martin



This summer has produced some of the most delicious and juicy wild raspberries I've ever seen on Mackinac. This is an opinion shared by a number of the Island's residents. Perhaps it has been the warm (not to say hot) weather, or just the right amount of rain at the right time, but whatever the circumstances that brought it about, we've had great wild raspberries this year.

The Wild Red Raspberry (*Rubus strigosus*) is in the Rose family and in its genus, *Rubus*, such plants as Blackberry, Dewberry, and Thimbleberry can also be found. This group of plants is often considered the "most valuable wild fruit in North America," according to Bradford Angier in his *Field Guide to Medicinal Wild Plants*. These plants produce wonderful food for people, birds, and animals. There are at least 50 distinct species of blackberries and raspberries in the United States and some are difficult to differentiate.

Wild Red Raspberry is a bristly or thorny erect or trailing bramble with leaves that are compound. The leaves on the cane that produces flowers and fruit are densely hairy beneath. The flower is five-petaled and white and the fruits are an aggregate of juicy drupelets. These fruits are bright red at maturity and at that point they easily separate from the receptacle.

These plants are found in all sorts of dry to moist open or slightly shaded ground. They're found in thickets, woods, shores, stream banks, and rocky openings. They're particularly common in damp wooded areas that have been cleared, burned, eroded, or otherwise disturbed. On Mackinac, one of the best areas to find them is at the clearing at Sugarloaf, along Juniper Trail, where the wind uprooted many trees more than 10 years ago, and near the top of the old ski hill on Stonecliffe. By the way, there are still some good berries to be had.

In addition to their importance as a food source and delicious flavor, Wild Raspberries have also had an important role as a medicinal plant. Wine and juice made from the berries are still used in Appalachia to combat diarrhea and the juice and berries were long used by many native tribes to treat chronic stomach trouble and to allay vomiting. They were also used to prevent miscarriage. In general the juices were believed to be beneficial to

digestion and were thought mild enough to treat diarrhea and dysentery even among infants and children. The juice was also considered soothing and tension relieving and was used by many to lessen menstrual flow.

In the fruits of the raspberry are citric and malic acid, which may be why early settlers used the juice to dissolve tartar on their teeth and numerous tribes used it to cure cankers of the mouth, gums, and tongue.

The leaves of the plants were often gathered to be used as a tea, which was thought to be pleasant and held to be a blood purifier and a spring tonic. This tea was also thought to help mothers in childbirth. The leaf tea, potently brewed, was also used on severe sores. In addition, the leaf tea was used as a mouthwash to deal with bad breath.

The roots were also used to make tea that was good for diarrhea and, in strong doses, as an antidote against some poisons. The tribes of this region used the inner bark of the root of the raspberry to treat cataracts. The second layer of inner bark of the rose root and that of the raspberry were scraped and put into a bit of cloth. It was then soaked in warm water and squeezed over the eye, letting some of the liquid run into the eye. This was done three times a day and it was said that this would cure a cataract unless it was too far advanced and that improvement would be shown quickly if the case could be materially helped. It was thought that the rose removed inflammation and the raspberry healed the eye. And you thought it was just a raspberry!

In the same genus of plants is another one that has been fruiting well this year, Thimbleberry (*Rubus parviflorus*). Thimbleberries are similar to raspberry, but instead of multiple leaflets



Wild Red Raspberry

they have only one, and are shaped a bit like a maple leaf. They have erect woody stems with shreddy bark. The flower is white and five-petaled and the fruit is reddish but more elongated than the raspberry, in the shape of a thimble. This is a plant that is abundant in the western Upper Peninsula and Isle Royale. It's common in large thickets in northern hardwood and moist mixed woods, especially along borders and clearings and usually near the Great Lakes. On Mackinac, I've found them along roadsides in a variety of places. The fruits are delicious.

The Thimbleberry has a special connection to the Island, as the species type was first found and described here by Thomas Nuttall in 1810 and who gave it its

specific epithet, *parviflorus*, which is slightly odd as it means "small flowered," when in fact the flowers are often a couple of inches across, much larger than its raspberry cousins.

P.S. A couple of nature note sightings of interest: The first Indian Pipe were spotted Monday, August 1, along Tranquil Bluff Trail just off Soldier's Garden Trail; and second, I was riding my horse along Soldier's Garden in the late evening, when a coyote ran parallel to me in the opposite direction.

*Trish Martin is a year-around resident of Mackinac Island, has earned a master's degree in botany from Central Michigan University, and owns Bogan Lane Inn.*

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