

SUNNYSIDE THYMES

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Know Your Natives

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NATIVE EDIBLES

There are a number of native edibles in Indiana. Some of those common to our area include morel mushrooms, paw paws, black walnuts, hickory nuts and blackberries.

The **morel mushroom** is considered a delicacy. Depending on the weather, morel season in southern Indiana begins in March/April and ends in May. The appearance of mayflowers usually indicates it is time to begin the morel hunt. The yellow morel, *Morchella americana*, is the most commonly recognized species found. It has a spongy, honeycomb-like appearance, with a gray to blonde exterior, and is hollow and white inside. Morels do contain a mildly toxic substance and should not be eaten raw, but cooking destroys the substance. Morels may be sauteed and can be paired with other foods.



Morel mushroom.
Photo: Chris Evans, Illinois Extension

Pawpaws, *Asimina triloba*, are sometimes known as the “Hoosier or Indiana bananas”. The Pawpaw tree grows in low woods and along rivers and streams. Its flavor is similar to a banana or mango. To eat the pawpaw, remove the peel and the seeds. Only the pulp should be eaten, not the skin or seeds.

Persimmons are produced by the American persimmon tree, *Diospyros virginiana*, which is native to the southern half of Indiana. The ripe fruit has sweet orange pulp used in puddings, cookies and candies. Persimmon fruits normally ripen in September and October. Unrip-



Ripe persimmon.
Photo: Purdue Univ., Ft. Wayne

One of the largest shagbark hickorys in Indiana, located in Floyds Knobs.



ened persimmons are high in tannin and very unpleasant taste. The fruit is best harvested after it falls from the trees when it is soft and sweet and can easily be gathered on the ground.

Black walnuts, *Juglans nigra*, are a rich source of vitamins and nutrients. The nutmeat has a strong, distinctive flavor, very different from the English walnuts usually found in supermarkets. It is used in cookies, cakes, fudge, and ice cream. Walnuts are ready to gather in September or October when they have fallen from the tree, are still green and their outer husk softens as determined by pressing the thumb into the husk. Wear gloves and older clothing when removing the nuts from their hulls since they contain a dye which can stain the skin for several weeks. After removal from the hull, the nuts should be dried for several weeks before cracking.



Hickory nuts are in the pecan family. The shagbark hickory tree, *Carya ovata*, produces nuts that are delicious, nutritious and a good source of minerals. They can be roasted, eaten as a snack, used in baking and cooking and ground into flour. Hickory nuts have dark husks which often open as the nut falls from the tree. Hickory nuts are easier to crack than walnuts, but the meats require more patience to remove because of their smaller size.

- **Wild blackberries**, aggregated as *Rubus fruticosus*, are sweet and juicy. Blackberry growth may be dense and the



Photo: University of Kentucky Extension

canes are very thorny. Berries are prime for picking in July and August. To pick blackberries, wear long sleeves, long pants and sturdy footwear. Despite the challenges when picking, the fruit is well worth the effort. Blackberries support the immune system and contain antioxidants, vitamins and minerals. They are used in desserts, jams, jellies, pies, candy, wine and liqueurs.

All of these native edibles are highly desired by animals, such as deer, squirrels, raccoons, birds and others, and they will likely be gathering and eating them before we arrive!

References

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