

Making Ripples

Marvelous Mulberries

by Amanda Bancroft

Mulberry season has arrived! This colorful fruit is reminiscent of Wonka's everlasting gobstopper candies, changing hues throughout the berry's development from white or light green to pink, red, dark purple and even black. Found throughout Northwest Arkansas, it's an easy snack when running errands or commuting to and from work, particularly along the Razorback Greenway. Just look for purplish-black stains along the bike trail and enthusiasm from the wildlife! While you should always exercise caution when grabbing fruit from the wild, mulberries pack a nutritious suitcase unlocked with delicious flavor when ripe.

According to the USDA, one cup of mulberries contains 60 calories and less than one percent daily value of fat. They're also a good source of protein, iron, fiber, and vitamins C and K. They contain antioxidants and support the immune system by stimulating white blood cells. Many studies claim that mulberries could beneficially boost our digestive system, vision, and memory (among other things) but more research is needed. Ancient Chinese medicine has used mulberries and their leaves for a variety of ailments including swelling, heart disease, and arthritis.

Mulberries are often found in desserts. They're used in seasonal salads, added to ice cream, yogurt or smoothies, and can be made into jams, jellies, pies and almost any type of baked good. They can usually substitute for other berries, like blackberries or strawberries. Just keep in mind that they aren't as sweet and have a milder flavor. Mulberries are great in breakfasts like granola or oatmeal, too!

Eating them raw as a snack is probably the healthiest option to avoid added sugars and processed flours. You can purchase them dried like raisins, but since they're growing wild throughout Northwest Arkansas, it's especially delicious, free and easy to harvest your own fresh fruits. Planting a female mulberry tree of a native variety (such as the American Mulberry, *Morus rubra*) is a great idea to ensure the fruits are organic and safe; if you do choose to forage, don't eat anything you can't confidently identify.

Why a female tree? Unless your mulberry has both male and female parts, female trees produce the berries but don't produce pollen, resulting in them being great for allergy sufferers in contrast to male mulberries, which spare our windshields from the female tree's berry mess but create so much pollen that they're banned in some cities out of consideration for those with asthma and allergies. Male mulberries have, through grafting, been converted to female trees to solve this problem.

Planting invasive Asian white mulberries, however, is not a great idea: our native mulberries are susceptible to hybridization with them, and *Morus rubra* is listed as an endangered species in Canada. But if you plant a tree, it can live up to 125 years and grow 70 feet tall! So think long-

term. June is typically the peak of mulberry season, so don't delay if you want to harvest some delicious and nutritious gifts from nature.

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.