

Blackberry Patch

by Alice Outwater

Just down the dirt road from our 1880 summer cottage is a blackberry patch planted 90 years ago. The town actually owns the adjacent field, but the patch is so close I feel it is mine. The bushes seem to have a presence of their own, and the summer transformation from bare ground to bushes that produce so prolifically connects me with something bigger than life. If these many bushes were in my small garden, the patch would dominate everything, but it adds merely a punctuation point.

Round stems push up from the ground in late spring, then quickly become transformed into sturdy stalks with branches on which the berries grow. In June the patch transforms into a cloud of white blossoms so dainty and soft you want to climb up and lie on them. By July it becomes a mass of green leaves, tangled branches, interspersed with long, bare twigs from the year before. Soon a suggestion of berries begins that gradually develops into long luscious blackberries. By then spikes on the stems become as sharp as swords and painful if you carelessly brush against them.

When the blackberries ripen in August, as many as 15 clumps form on a branch, each holding more than a dozen fat berries. They start out small, round and green until they finally become long, plump and jet-black. The crunchy seeds make them favorites; some people complain the seeds get stuck between their teeth, but those people wouldn't like raspberries either. One difference is you can stand up while picking blackberries; they reveal themselves more than raspberries for which you have to hunt, even lift the leaves and peek under them to grab the ripe ones.

It is safest to pick from the road, where you can hold your berry basket and plop the berries inside. Don't forget to pop a few inside your mouth, especially if the day is sunny and the berries are warm and totally ripe. They dissolve as they touch your tongue into a sweet, delicious juice, leaving behind the crunch of seeds. Early morning is best for picking



John and Alice Outwater at the blackberry patch.

After they denude the bushes you will have to wait until tomorrow for more to ripen—or venture into the heart of the patch.

For this dangerous adventure take your clippers and your gardening gloves. Start by making a labyrinth of paths to allow safe passage into the central area. But step cautiously. Those spikes will leave deep scratches on your arms and legs. If you are skillful, you may be able to disguise the path so others do not realize it is there.

Inside you'll find a totally private area, surrounded by the tall branches going in everywhich direction and hanging heavily with masses of berries. You can look up at the blue sky, shield your eyes from the bright sunshine and lose yourself in another world. You may want to pick them one by one so as not to squish any; even a sizable basket will fill rapidly.

One year they were haying the field and mistaken-

three-inch stubbles. The great-grandson of Joseph Mott Hall, who planted them nine decades ago, fumed and complained, but the deed was done. However, the following year, the patch grew back looking stronger than ever with a stunning crop of berries. We all rejoiced that the bushes had not only survived but were thriving.

Occasionally, I have found a bird's nest on a branch and had to decide how to circumvent this until the babies were raised. I've become inordinately territorial about this berry patch, disliking those who drive up, park on the side of the road and pick as if they are entitled. Or pickers who bring children and dogs who run around shouting and barking. Such a berry patch deserves respect—and this is unseemly behavior.

As August continues, the clusters of berries get thinner and thinner until every last berry has been picked by people or birds. The leaves droop and die back for winter, and the patch looks forlorn compared to its earlier youthful showing.

I've often wondered how many quarts have been gathered, how many pies, blackberry cobblers, jars of jam and breakfasts of corn flakes have been topped with blackberries. Or how many tongues each summer have been turned an unmistakable purple.