

Autumn Olive

Elaeagnus umbellata •

perennial

One of the greatest gifts Eva has shared with me is her passion for autumn olives. Don't let the name mislead you. These shrubs grow berries, not olives. The name "autumn olive" was adopted because the leaves resembles olive leaves. The leaves have a silver sheen on their underside that creates a lustrous shimmer whenever the wind blows. The small red berries resemble currants but are a shade darker and not translucent. When you get really close you can observe tiny silver specks all over the berries, like they've been dusted with glitter. The berries appear in midfall and remain for six to eight weeks. Their flavor is a complex mix of tart and sweet, but it varies from bush to bush, and week to week, intensifying in sweetness steadily from October through November, and also after a few frosty nights.

Sam Thayer, one of our foremost authorities on foraging, writes on his website, [Forager's Harvest \(www.foragersharvest.com\)](http://www.foragersharvest.com), "It truly baffles me how the autumn-olive remains one of the biggest wild food secrets in North America. Over vast regions of this continent, it is our most common wild fruit."

It didn't get to be so common through human effort. The shrub has the ability to "fix" nitrogen from the atmosphere—much like legumes do—nourishing both the plant and the soil it grows in. It is drought-tolerant and disease-resistant. Because of this, autumn olive shrubs have been widely planted in disturbed areas and along highways, where its spreading roots help prevent soil erosion. The shrubs also act as screens and noise barriers and provide cover and food for wildlife. What state planners did not take into account, however, was the shrubs' ability to outcompete native species and colonize infertile soils.

Nowadays it is illegal, in some states, to transplant or sell autumn olive shrubs because they are so invasive. They can threaten local ecosystems, outcompeting indigenous plants. Some localities have eradicated them, but Eva has assured me these tenacious shrubs will be impossible

to obliterate completely.

Autumn olive was first cultivated in the United States in the 1800s, but it originated in China, Korea, and Japan. On the west coast of North America can be found a related species called Russian olive (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*), which produces yellow berries. My friend Russ Cohen, a well-known forager in New England, tells me that Russian olive berries are not quite as good for eating as those of the autumn olive.

Culinary Uses

In my humble opinion, the autumn olive's highest purpose is to sit atop a bowl of morning cereal. A handful of these berries boosts your nutrient intake and offers fruity enjoyment with your morning. In fact, I usually freeze a gallon or so of berries every fall for this very purpose.

Each berry contains a single seed, and for such tiny berries, the seeds are surprisingly large. Still, they almost never bother me. They are pleasantly chewy and merrily float down my digestive tract along with the fruit. But, if you prefer, you can remove the seeds by running the berries through a food mill.

The berry is tart and acidic, so it works well in both desserts and savory dishes. I can't say I've ever tasted better sorbet than Eva's made from autumn olive. To this end, cooks the berries to separate the "nectar" from the pulp. She freezes the pureed pulp in quart containers and cans the nectar in glass jars that she keeps in



her pantry. To make sorbet, she combines frozen berry puree with the nectar, along with some kind of fabulous accent like frozen rose petals, raspberries, strawberries, knotweed puree, pears, or a liqueur, all of which she purees in her Vitamix blender. These sorbets can range from simply delightful to mind-blowing. It's hard to imagine a healthier dessert, and you don't leave the table feeling weighed down. There are many sorbet recipes in this book that call for the autumn olive nectar and puree.

I make a simple and tart autumn olive jam. It's an exquisite preserve that people don't forget, and it is great on toast, with venison, or added to yogurt. Then there is Russ Cohen's autumn olive fruit leather, which alone makes buying a dehydrator worth it. The chefs at No. 9 Park in Boston make jellied candy with these berries (don't ask me how), and they also make an autumn olive syrup for cocktails.

Chefs around town like to offset the berries against meat or game. Adam Halberg of Barcelona restaurants in Connecticut says that the berries' tannin structure complements meat. He serves an Umbrian duck with lentils sauced with the autumn olive juice, red wine, and verjus, garnishing it with fresh berries. Keith Pooler of Bergamot in Somerville, Massachusetts, serves autumn olives with pork shoulder. He also makes a caramel sauce from the berries, red wine vinegar, and pork jus and serves it with roasted local turnips.

Health Virtues

No wonder Eva has so much energy. These berries are crammed with nutrients. When I find a grove of autumn olive shrubs with branches so loaded with fruit that they droop, I imagine this berry solving the world's malnutrition problem. Each glittering red fruit contains about eighteen times as much lycopene as a tomato, and the lycopene content is only increased by cooking. Yet these berries go largely uneaten, perhaps because they don't come packaged and have no marketing budget.

Foraging and Storing

Look for autumn olive shrubs along roads, in parking lots, or in fields. They are usually about 8 feet tall but can grow to almost twice that, and the thin green leaves shimmer in the breeze, like a school of silver fish swimming upstream to spawn. This treelike shrub grows wild in most states. When you see one shrub, undoubtedly others will be nearby. Luckily for me, there are thousands where I live in Massachusetts.

If you find a tree flush with berries, you can pick 3 or 4 gallons of berries in less than an hour by stroking the berries off the branches into a tub. There are probably all sorts of high-tech ways to maximize your efficiency. Eva picks by cutting off choice loaded branches with pruning shears into a bin, and she strips them at home. This method seems to benefit the shrub.

If you want to nibble on fresh berries, they store best when kept on the branch in the refrigerator or an equally cool spot. In the fall the multipurpose table in Eva's house always sports a branch or two for drive-by nibbling. As I mentioned earlier, I like to save some autumn olives for the rest of the year by taking them off the branches and freezing them in ziplock bags. I add them daily to my granola, improving its taste and hoping to increase my days on this planet.