

San Antonio's Springtime Forage: Agarita and Dewberries

JOSIE SEELIGSON APRIL 19, 2015

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Mike Casey taps an agarita bush with a bamboo pole to dislodge the berries onto the sheet below.

Photo by Josie Seeligson.

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Spring road trips with our grandmother meant piling into her green '72 Chevy Impala and driving to the small Texas town of Giddings, her birthplace brimming with German relatives. Her sister lived nearby on a farm that beckoned as the family gathering spot. There, my own sister and I scampered with cousins making straw forts in the hay barn, trying in vain to ride cows, or doubling up on banana-seat bikes to peddle dirt roads across railroad tracks, on candy missions to the dime store in the town's covered storefront area.

But the best memory of those road trips was berry picking. With the grandmothers, we high-stepped in rubber or cowboy boots through grassy pastures toward tangled vines of berries or mustang grapes. Long rubber dishwashing gloves engulfed our small arms, meant to protect us from stinging grape juice or thorns, and moistened our skin with sweat and the smell of trapped dish suds. We peered beneath floppy hats looking for vines, as tall pasture grass around us hopped with crickets, cousins, and tail-wagging dogs.



Mike Casey (left) on an agarita berry forage south of San Antonio. Photo by Josie Seeligson.

After the picking, adults gabbed around a wooden kitchen table as berries were rinsed and pots simmered on the stove, preparing purple goo for jellies and pies. We kids played hide and seek in the attic or screen porch, as jelly steam and the aroma of bubbling cobbler seeped through the farmhouse's musty wood planks, finding us wherever we hid. It didn't matter that we kids were sorry berry-pickers and kitchen helpers. The grandmothers knew what I, as a mother, know now: it was not so much the fruits, but the experience, we were harvesting. Free-running childhood days in the country may be fleeting and far-between, but their sensory experiences linger and nourish a person's soul long after.

Luckily, San Antonio's region offers some edible wild berries to pick from in late spring, particularly, agarita and dewberries. Mike Casey, downtown property owner, attorney, and current owner of [Isaac Maxwell Metal](#) on S. St Mary's Street, says he also picked berries with his grandmother, who never wasted anything, especially agarita bush berries (*Mahonia trifoliolata*). Agarita's small yellow flowers fill air across Texas with fragrance in early March, especially in well-drained, sandy soil areas, before they morph into small red berries.

Mike also watched his grandmother pick the berries, then wash and cook them to jelly. He engenders her methods today. During late April — often Fiesta week, “which isn't always convenient” — their berries perch ready for harvest to eat raw, cook for jams/jellies, wine, syrup, or even roast for decaffeinated coffee rich in vitamin C. Densely packed red berries nestle among pointy leaves that make harvesting tricky. Casey recommends wearing surgical gloves that shield hands yet retain dexterity.

“You can feel the prick but it's not bad.” He adds, though, that he's taken some macho friends picking, who still cry, ‘Ow! Ow! Ow!’ even when wearing surgical gloves.



Agarita berry jelly connoisseur Mike Casey with Josie Seeligson, making agarita jelly. Courtesy photo.

To help avoid the leaves' pricks, Casey sometimes lays a sheet on the ground beneath an agarita bush, and uses a stick to dislodge the berries (see top photo).

“You can try to be kind to the bush and pick by hand, or tap and beat the bush. You lay out a sheet, get the leaves and chaffe, then winnow out the berries,” he said. One way to separate berries is put berries and debris in a sink of water; leaves and twigs will float at different weights than berries, so can be separated more easily. Next, simmer berries, then strain their juice through muslin cloth. Once you get the juice, you're ready to make jelly.

Agarita berries contain good amounts of pectin, a natural thickening agent needed to make jellies gel. [Trinity University](#) biology professor Kelly Lyons explains pectin as a polysaccharide, found in fruit cell walls, but with higher amounts in some than others.

“As a general rule, the softer the fruit, the less pectin it contains.” Dr. Lyons said that jams, made with whole fruit instead of only juice, usually count higher in both fiber and pectin. It is possible, she adds, if needing more pectin for gelling, to mix fruits with high pectin content with those with low pectin content.

After years of experimenting with proportions and ingredients, Casey’s favorite jelly ratio is six cups agarita juice to four cups sugar. He simmers this to dissolve the sugar, then raises the temperature to eight degrees above boiling point, which differs depending on sea level (usually around 220 degrees —insert a candy thermometer for an exact reading). Casey says once you’ve watched the jelling process happen a few times, you recognize it visually, too.

“There is a look to the bubbles – really tiny little bubbles all over the top — when it gets to the jelling point,” Casey said.

Sterilize the jars and their tops by boiling them in a huge pot of water and removing with tongs to dry. Pour the jelly mixture into the jars, add the rubber seal, cover and ring, then turn over to seal and listen for the lids to pop while cooling. Dr. Lyons says she waits to add the outer ring to her jars until she sees the cover suck downward, to ensure there is no “off-gassing of growing microbes.” Casey tries to make 20 ½-pints: enough jelly to eat all year plus give to special friends.



Freshly cooked agarita jelly is poured into a jar to be eaten later. Photo by Josie Seeligson.



Agarita juice is strained through a muslin cloth after cooking. Photo by Josie Seeligson.



Agarita juice is strained through a muslin cloth after cooking. Photo by Josie Seeligson.



Freshly cooked agarita jelly is poured into a jar to be eaten later. Photo by Josie Seeligson.



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Casey has planted 10 agarita bushes in his own front yard, noting other attributes. “They have beautiful blue-green leaves, yellow blossoms with the most delicious smell ... and they create a natural fence. No one’s going to walk through them,” he says, adding they don’t like to be babied with any extra watering, thus make a good xeriscape plant. He’s also paid attention to where they bloom in urban San Antonio, occasionally getting permission to pick berries at other spots. (Hint: Brackenridge stretch of San Antonio River Reach. Or south on Mission Reach right before Lone Star Blvd. — just remember wildlife relies on the River’s ecosystem also.) He’s driven up Highway 281 to the Hill Country, or across the Mexican border south of Laredo, where a friend has sandy soil property. “I planted some agarita bushes there and they went crazy,” he said.

San Antonio’s region also boasts dewberries (*Rubus flagellaris*), during May. Related to blackberries, dewberry vines slink and tangle in ground patches, in full sun or beneath shady oak trees. White, five-petal vine flowers bloom in March, then by May, roughly six weeks after the last freeze, so long as some rain falls, morph to red, then purple fruits. Dr. Lyons explains dewberries are not technically berries, but an “aggregate fruit, made from a single flower with multiple slightly fused ovaries (the bumps).”



Freshly picked wild dewberries, related to blackberries, grow around San Antonio during May. Photo by Josie Seeligson.

Once ripe, if not eaten by wildlife, dewberries wither within a week or two, so timing matters. Wear boots and use a stick to prod, as fire ants, rodents, or even venomous snakes share the habitat. When spotting dewberries, if you see one, let your eyes adjust and other berries will show themselves, blinking like fireflies. There are some years so many grow that you can stand in one spot and pick with abandon, eating all you want, and filling every container for later. Other years bring hardly a mouthful. This spring looks promising because of decent rainfall. Dewberries bruise easily, so pick them gently, then rinse by

slowly filling a sinkful with water and gently stirring to dislodge dirt and debris. They make exceptional cobblers, jams or toppings for yogurt, cereal, salads, or simple snacks.

Finally, if hiking pastures isn't your thing, and the backyard or community garden doesn't produce them, some regional farms let people pick from tidy cultivated plants. This easy, safe, option is thoroughly enjoyable, just may require a field trip and fee. Here are two regional farms that seasonally feature pick-your-own berries, peaches and more:

- [Love Creek Orchards](#), near Kerrville. 14024 St. Hwy 16N, Medina, Texas 78055
- [Marburger Farms](#), near Fredericksburg. 559 Kuhlman Road. 5.25 miles south of Fredericksburg, (830) 997-9433.

**Featured/top image: Mike Casey taps an agarita bush with a bamboo pole to dislodge the berries onto the sheet below. Photo by Josie Seeligson.*

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ABOUT JOSIE SEELIGSON

Josie Seeligson earned a B.S. from Vanderbilt University and an M.A. in Journalism from the University of Texas at Austin. She has worked as a freelance writer, copy editor and copy writer for various San Antonio and Austin publications and businesses, and on the staff and board of Gemini Ink. She also manages a wholesale tree nursery, Pajarito Tree Farm, in Pandora, Texas, and resides in San Antonio.

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