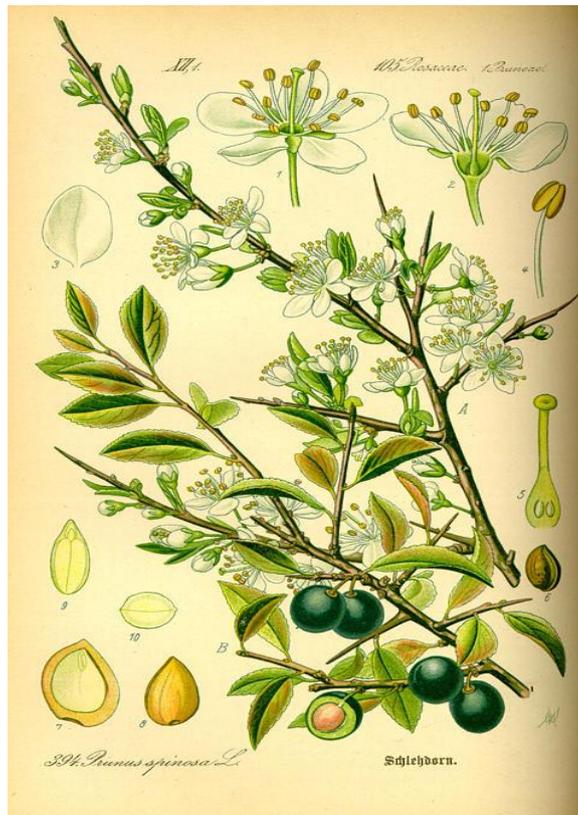




THE WILD SLOE BERRY

HARVESTING SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER FOR THE
NOVEMBER WILD&SLOW



THE JUST-ABOUT COMPLETE, BEGINNERS GUIDE ON
WHERE TO FIND IT, WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE,
HOW TO PICK IT, HOW TO PREPARE IT,
AND HOW TO PRESERVE IT UNTIL NOVEMBER WITH
SUGGESTED RECIPES FOR ANY STALLHOLDER WISHING
TO PARTAKE IN WILD&SLOW



Sloes are the fruit of the Blackthorn tree *prunus spinosa* or in Irish *áirne* and in early Irish *áirne fíadain*. The word means sour. So sour that it's hard to believe that it is related to all the luscious plums of the garden, or of all the sweet plums and fruits of the plum family. Despite its sour taste it's been eaten on this island since ancient times as ancient kitchen midden all over the Ireland demonstrate.

In mediaeval monasteries it was turned into an alcoholic drink. The folk practice continued with sloe-flavoured distilled poitín and, more legally, by adding sloes just to flavour gin.

Sloes make a good jelly and a wonderfully rich-coloured wine with a taste so similar to port that dishonest wine merchants were recorded as using this adulterated port to make the prized drink go further. The raw juice of sloes was used as a purge, the dye to produce a bluish-lavender colour; the leaves re used as a tea to drink and as a homemade "tobacco" to smoke. The shillelagh, the blackthorn stick (spikes and all), was used to smite neighbours who offended you and, in the hands of overzealous clerics to beat courting couples out of the bushes. Irish folklore decrees it an unlucky tree. The blossoms were not brought into the house nor worn as a buttonhole.



Where to find Wild Sloe Berries

Hedgerows, pretty well everywhere although, not so prolific from Clare to Donegal, for obvious reasons. With its sharp spikes it makes the perfect stock-proof hedging plant and with spreading suckers it spreads quickly into an impenetrable barrier.

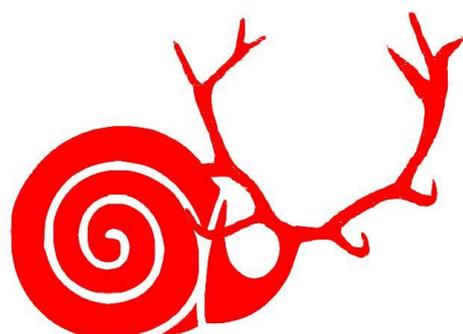


What it looks like



In looks, it is a dense tree-like shrub that can grow up to 3 metres high. The bark is blackish/brown. The fruit starts green, goes a purplish colour, then turns almost black and a bloom develops on the skin. The leaves are dark-green with an oval-shaped top. What really distinguishes this shrub are the long spiky thorns. In winter it is bare and very dark in colour; then early in spring prolific white flowers grow along the full length of the branch and last for a few weeks. After that the leaves develop and gradually the fruits form.

The perfect stone fruit for Slow Food because from early flowering to harvest is a long time. Although you will see the black fruits on the branch from August they are not ready for picking even if they have the "bloom" of natural yeast on the skin you must wait until after the first hard frosts before gathering them. The skins are thick and the frost makes them more porous. The leaves have usually fallen before this occurs making them easy to spot in the hedgerows. Sloes, like plums and damsons, flower and fruit best when the temperature the winter before has fallen below minus 7°C for at least a week or ten days. In 2011, this certainly happened, hence the remarkably heavy crop this year.



How to pick

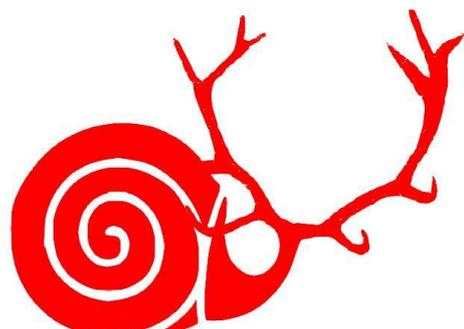
Choose a place away from traffic fumes and wear a long-sleeved thorn-proof jacket and tightly fitting gloves (old leather ones are ideal). It's said that it's better to beat or shake fruits from the tree but, as they tend to grow alongside brambles, you would need to spread sacking or an old blanket out to catch them, or you just get scratched by bramble thorns instead of blackthorn spikes. A strong berry picker is useful, but don't forget the thorns will still be lurking along with the sloes.

How to prepare

Spread out on a flat surface and remove the berries from the twigs and leaves. If you have a garden sieve to hand it's a useful way of doing this. As for washing, if you do so there is a danger of washing off the natural yeast, which shows as a bloom on the skin.

Traditional uses

No one in their right mind would eat a sloe from the tree. They are intensely astringent, sour and bitter. Our ancient ancestors must have been clever when they devised ways of making them palatable. Like olives they have to be treated either with frost, heat, cooking with sugar or honey, soaking in alcohol, brewed into wine, or distilled. Indeed, there are references in the literature to a monastic tradition of doing just that, distilling into spirits or adding as flavouring in potato or grain spirits. This would have been traditional. Gradually the English version caught on and the tradition to make the well-known Sloe Gin, which is a well-flavoured, claret-coloured red spirit. Can also be preserved with the addition of crab apples as a jelly. Cyril and Kit O'Ceirin have written of a children's version of sloe gin popular in their childhood. (2)



Preserving Wild Sloe Berries

Dried, preserved in sugar syrup, in wine and in spirits. Sloes may also be preserved with sugar in a jam or jelly. They are low in pectin so are usually combined with crab apples.

Cooked with a little water and simmered until soft. Strained though a jelly bag and proceed as you would for any jelly.

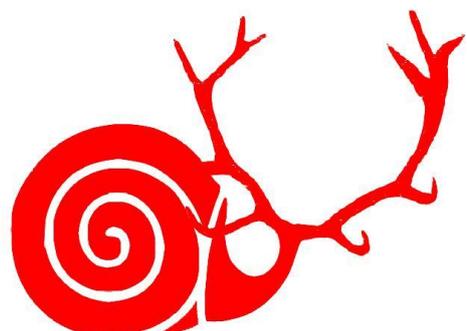
Preserving Wild Sloe Berries by Drying

Wash the Sloes and spread out on rack to dry in a sunny, airy spot indoors. They will take up to four weeks at room temperature. Drying in a dehydrator will take six to eight hours. To oven dry spread washed Sloes on roasting trays. Dry for one hour in a cooling oven at 50°C and leave in oven to cool. Repeat this for seven days in a row.

Storing dried Sloes. These are as resilient as raisins and seem to last forever, store in a Kilner jar in a cool, dry, dark place.

Preserving Wild Sloe Berries by Alcohol

Sloes may be made into an excellent wine with sugar and a little extra yeast. It takes at least a year to mature. Sloes may be preserved with sugar and spirits such as gin, vodka or even poitín (or so we hear!) This needs about 3 months to mature fully.



Possible recipes that might be suitable for a stallholder at Wild&Slow

Wild Sloe Berry Jelly

2 kg **Wild Sloes**

1 kg Wild Crab Apples

Sugar sufficient to add 500g to each 500ml of the strained fruit juice.

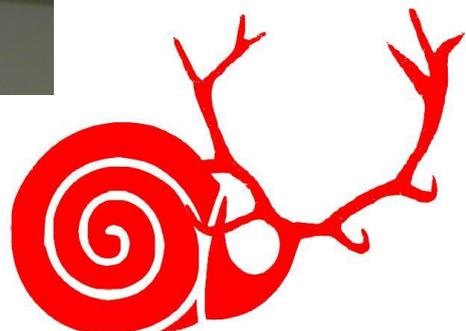
Wash and cut the crab apples into half. Put in preserving pan. Rinse sloes and add to the pot. Just cover with water and cook over a gentle heat until the sloes have burst and the crab apples are mushy.

Strain through a jelly bag over night. Do not squeeze. Measure the juice and add the correct amount of sugar. Heat until the temperature reaches 105c. Boil for another two minutes. Test to see if it has reached setting point. A little on a cold plate should wrinkle after a minute.

Skim and pour into warmed sterilised jars. Cool before covering tightly.

Store in a cool dry place. Store in the fridge, after opening.

Note: depending on how tart or sweet you want the finished jelly to be you may vary the proportion of sloes to crab apples. The more sloes the tarter the jelly will be. If you are more likely to use this with game or game sauces then you may not wish it to be over sweet.



Wild Sloe Berry Gin

The amount of sugar you use determines whether this results in Wild Sloe schnapps or a Wild Sloe liqueur. This version is our favourite and when complete should be served straight from the freezer, ice cold in shot glasses, to share with your friends at Christmas

1 Bottle really good gin divided (it's for your friends, only the best!)

Enough Sugar to fill one third of the bottle

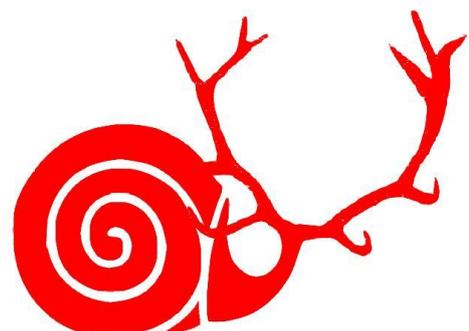
Enough **Wild Sloes** to fill one half of the bottle

A few shelled and peeled almonds (optional)

Fill the bottle one third full of sugar. Each sloe must be pierced with a sharp fork or a darning needle and placed at once into the bottle (therapy!). Top up with the spirit of your choice refit the cap tightly. Shake to help dissolve the sugar and release the juice of the sloes. Shake once a day for seven days and once a week for seven weeks. Half way through, you can add the almonds. At first the liquid will be tinged with pink and over the weeks it will turn darker into a rich purple.

Christmas is the traditional time to broach the bottle. In reality it is better of left for several more months. Strain and decant the liquid alone into a fresh bottle.

Now shake out the Wild Sloes, and this is the best part. Pass through a mill and use the boozy pulp to add flavour to a dessert. Syllabub, fruit fools, Ice cream, tipsy cake, boozy fairy cakes, cheesecake, plumb and almond tart immediately spring to mind but it's also cool in scones, brioche, breads or even winter puds.



A Non Alcoholic (or nearly so!) **Wild Sloe Berry Cordial.**

Sloes develop natural yeast, which shows as a bloom on the skin, this needs to be fully washed off for this drink

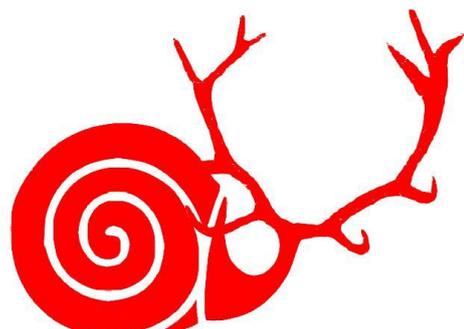
Enough **Wild Sloes** to half a fill half a bottle.

Enough sugar to almost half fill a bottle.

Boiled water, cooled to lukewarm.

Add sugar to bottle. Prick the sloes with a fork or darning needle and place in bottle. Top up with the water. Cap really firmly and shake. Store at room temperature. Shake once a day for seven days and once a week for seven weeks. Strain and decant the liquid alone into a fresh bottle. Drink diluted.

Now shake out the Wild Sloes, and this is the best part as in the Sloe Gin recipe above, the Sloes mightn't be boozy, but they definitely have been sweetened and can be used in all the recipe ideas described for Sloe Berry pulp.



Wild Sloe Berry Wine

4 litres of **Wild Sloe Berries**

4 litres water

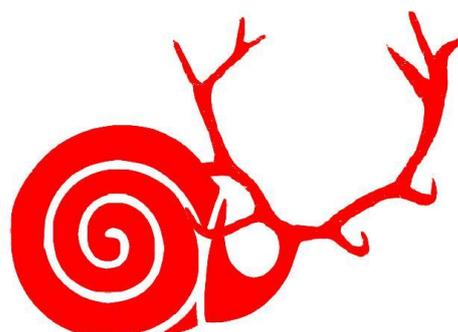
1 kg sugar (or to taste)

20-25 g wine yeast (Claret yeast is good)

This makes a fairly sweet port like wine, perfect with any full-on stomping cheeses, over a winter's eve.

Place sloes in a fermentation bucket. Add the boiling water and bash or mash the sloes. Cover. Every day for one week stir and bash a little more. Strain and pour the remaining liquid into a clean fermentation bucket.

Take a litre or so of the must (the liquid) heat and then dissolve the sugar in the must. Pour this into remaining must and stir again. Test the temperature of the liquid, before adding yeast, 21c is ideal. Sprinkle yeast on top, cover and leave to ferment for about four weeks. You may if you wish add yeast nutrient if it is slow or stops too soon. Taste the must and if you feel it is too sour add more sugar. Siphon into a demijohn, fit the fermentation lock and leave in a cool place for another month or thereabouts. Siphon into bottles or another demijohn and cork or cap. This wine needs at least a year to mature.





Plum Tart, with a Wild Sloe Gin Pulp and a Wild Sloe Jelly Glaze.

- 1 pastry case, baked blind
- 450gm ripe plums
- 1-2 tablespoons flaked almonds
- 6 tablespoons **Wild Sloe** gin pulp
- 2-3 tablespoons Sloe Jelly, melted and warmed.

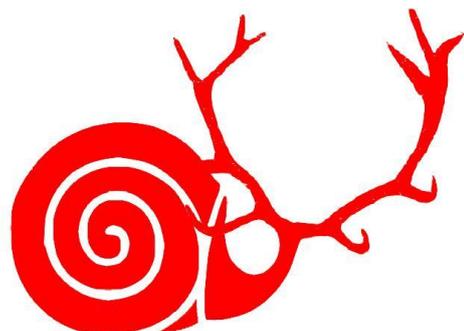
Cut plums in half and twist to remove stone. Place in neat pattern and close together in the pastry case. Fill the hollowed out plum halves with the sloe gin pulp, sprinkle the almonds on top.

Bake at 170c until the plums are cooked and the pastry is lightly browned and crisp. Remove from oven and pour the warmed sloe jelly over the top. Share.

Boozy Wild Sloe Berry Fairy Cakes

- 120g. Butter
- 120g. Sugar
- 120g. Flour
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1 tbsp **Wild Sloe** Gin (optional)
- 4 tbsp **Wild Sloe** Gin pulp
- Icing (optional)

Whisk butter and sugar until very light and fluffy add flour and beaten eggs alternately and whisk in the sloe gin/vodka. Spoon enough of the sponge mixture to cover the bottom of each paper case, spoon a small dollop of the sloe pulp on top of the sponge mixture and finally top each cake with the remaining sponge mixture. Bake at 170c for 10-15 minutes (depending on size) and allow cool.



Wild Sloe Fruit Leather

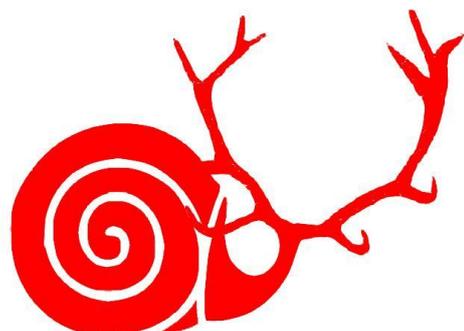
They may also be preserved as, a fruit leather according to a recipe from Ray Mears (3) Handy perhaps, come the revolution but not perhaps the best use of beautiful but challenging hedgerow fruit. Our version is much more user friendly:

After making the Sloe Gin or Sloe Cordial, take the berries, press through a sieve to remove the centres. Spread this fabulous sweet pulp on a dehydrator tray or baking tray. Dehydrate or place on baking trays in as low an oven as possible, overnight or until dry.

Now you have a wonderful dried Sloe Leather/Pulp, that'll last forever! Use it with your imagination, use it in syllabub, fruit fools, Ice cream, tipsy cake, boozy fairy cakes, cheesecake, plumb and almond tart or in scones, brioche, breads or even winter puds, as described above.

Come on, you've had enough to stir your imagination...go for it!

- (1) An Englishman's Flora. Geoffrey. Grigson 1956.
- (2) Wild and Free Cyril and Kit O'Ceirin published by O' Brien Press 1978.
- (3) Ray Mears, Wild Food. BBC Books





The Nitty-Gritty

Okay...so here's the nitty-gritty, but don't let it put you off! All twelve or so of these 'Wild Food Templates' for gathering and harvesting Wild Foods have been chosen because they are highly identifiable. It is always desirable for the first time forager to go out with someone who has experience.

However, as always, it is up to you to discern what to pick, how to harvest it and preserve it in a manner that would be in keeping with and fit for our ancestors.

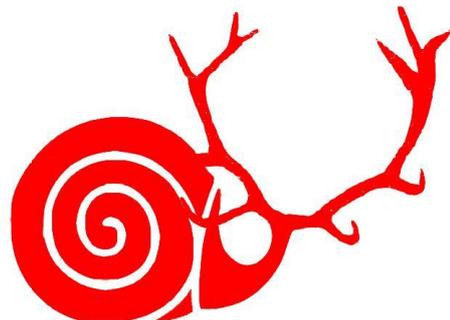
Remember, if in doubt.... don't!

Disclaimer

For countless generations our forefathers/mothers gathered Wild Foods and it seems they did so pretty well...after all we're all still here! However modern protocol demands that we produce a disclaimer like this. So here we go.

The above plant images, although helpful, are not for identifying purposes. It is important to use a good guide, unless you are familiar with these plants. This post is only an introduction to the plants mentioned therein, and should not be relied upon in isolation. Foraging guides of repute should always be used, and one should always err on the conservative side, remembering, that it is important to read any guide together with any caution notes, and ultimately responsibility for your safety and those that you give, serve or sell these foods to, lies with you.

All information contained including various recipes are purely for illustrative and informative purposes only and ultimately it is the user that determines as to how the above mentioned Wild Food, might be used.



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