Photo courtesy: Jeff Stringer

There's an old saying about not being able to see the forest for the trees, and to some extent that is true of how people generally view forested land. People may see the timber value of trees, but they may not be able to see the possible economic value of the shrubs and ground-dwelling plants in the forest.

Non-Timber Forest Products

Gleaning the Forest

by Deborah Hill

Gleaning is an old term for gathering grain left after harvesting or finding pieces of information, but today is more generally used for finding and collecting something of potential economic value which is not already being used. If your eyes are open, there are lots of items that can be gleaned from the forest. Many of these may be craft items, and can be used to create value-added crafts by the person who collects them or can be sold as raw materials to other people who do make crafts. Central Kentucky (especially the Kentucky Artisan Center at Berea off Interstate-75) is well-known for its wood crafts locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.

So what's out there? Starting at the ground level, there are three groups to look for. Before the trees leaf out, there are the spring flowers that carpet the forest floor. Many of them reproduce by runners under the soil, by layering (where a leafed tip of a branch lays on the forest floor and then puts out new roots), or by dividing bulbs or other large roots to form new plants. Select a small percentage (less than 25%) of mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum)*, dog-tooth violet (*Erythronium americanum*), Johnny jump-ups (*Viola bicolor*), and many others. Make sure you identify the plants accurately and determine that they are not federally listed as threatened or endangered, or listed as rare by the Kentucky State Nature Preserves Commission (www.naturepreserves.ky.gov). Remember that abuses occur when it comes to collecting wildflowers including trespassing and collecting rare or threatened or endangered species. Even when done within the law, collecting rare species or over collecting on your own property could have a damaging effect on wildflower populations. This is especially true for particularly beautiful and uncommon flowers such as trilliums and lady slipper orchids. Good identification is critical to making good decisions about what to glean and a good identification book will also give information on how the plant reproduces itself. A good resource for both medicinal and attractive botanical plants is The Medicinal Botanicals Program at Mountain State University in Beckley, WV (www.mountainstate.edu/usda). Also do your homework and determine if the species you have will respond favorably to transplant. Some do not. You do not want to waste, time, money and effort on plants that cannot be transplanted successfully. Once decisions have been made about the species that are appropriate to transplant, dig up some of these plants and re-establish them in a shady spot near home, then pot them up for sale in the spring months just as they are about to bloom. Always leave a few of the "spreading" plants in your transplant bed so that they will continue to reproduce there and provide a new supply for potting each year. Garden clubs or other local horticulture groups hold plant sales in the spring where it may be possible to market these plants.

Mayapples are one of the spring flowers that can be found on the forest floor.

Photo courtesy: David Stephens, www.forestryimages.org

Also at the ground level are the medicinal plants, including goldenseal (*Hydrastis canadensis)*, ginseng (P*anax qinquefolius*), bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), black cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*), blue cohosh (*Caulophyllum thalictroides*), wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*), Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*), and others. Note that the same cautionary statements regarding rare wildflower collection also pertains to medicinal plants. These plants can also be encouraged to spread. Ginseng needs many years to grow marketable roots, and goldenseal needs three or four years. The others generally

can reach maturity in one year. Mints (*Mentha* spp.) and berry bushes (*Rubus* spp.) produce leaves that are good for teas (as well as berries in the latter case), as are the roots of sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*).

Kentucky's woods have native mushrooms that can be harvested in season. Morels (*Morchella* spp.) in the spring and chanterelles (*Cantharellus cibarius*) in the fall are pretty easy to identify (morels are cream-colored or black, and their conical caps look like sponges; chanterelles are bright yellow and have a vase or fluted shape) and hard to confuse with other—possibly poisonous—mushrooms. Both species grow on the forest floor (not on trees or downed wood) and may be found in the same locations year after year. Another edible species of mushroom (when fresh and bright creamy white) that grows on the forest floor is a puffball (*Calvatia cyanthiformis*), both normal- (golf ball) sized and giant. Hen-of-the-woods (*Grifola frondosa*) grows in flat, rosette-like clusters, often at the base of oak trees or on oak logs in late summer or fall. Lion's mane (*Hericium erinaceum*) grows in a large, whitish mass with downward spikes on wounds of hardwood trees such as beech, oak (*Quercus* spp.), and maple. Since there are many kinds of mushrooms in our forests that are poisonous, use a good mushroom identification book when you go mushrooming. One that is filled with color photographs and detailed descriptions is William C. Roody's *Mushrooms of West Virginia and the Central Appalachians*. All of the above mentioned mushrooms are highly desirable to chefs and can be marketed to restaurants.

Photo courtesy: Deborah Hill

Morel mushroom

Shrubs and trees grow native fruits and nuts. Pawpaw, persimmon (*Diospyrus virginiana)*, wild grape (*Vitis* spp.), black raspberries (*Rubus occidentalis*), blackberries (*R. fructicosus*), blueberries (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), hazelnuts (*Corylus cornuta*), black walnut, white walnut (butternut) (*Juglans cinerea*), beechnuts, and some hickory nuts (*Carya* spp.) are often found in Kentucky woods. If there is already a good crop of fruits or nuts on these trees or shrubs, you can thin around them to give them more growing space.

Grape vines
Photo courtesy: Tom Barnes

Trees can provide saps and syrups. Any species of the maple genus (*Acer* spp.) can produce sap in the late winter/early spring to boil down into maple syrup—sugar maple usually has the highest sugar content in its sap, but the others will work, too. Since the correct boiling equipment for making maple syrup is expensive, it might be possible to collaborate with neighbors and collect maple sap to send to a central collection point for someone else to make the syrup. Sweet birch and yellow birch (*Betula lenta* and *B. alleghaniensis*) have sap that tastes like wintergreen, and their sap can be concentrated into birch beer, root beer, or sarsaparilla.

Remove trees damaged by windstorms or ice storms and cut them up into firewood. As the price of nonrenewable energy sources such as fuel oil, coal, and natural gas continues to climb, more people are heating their homes with wood and want supplies of firewood. If you want to get fancy and split the wood into shrink-wrapped bundles to be sold at gas stations, you can make a good profit on wood that needs to be removed from the forest anyway.

Photo courtesy: Billy Thomas

Firewood is one of the most traditional non-timber forest products.

Small diameter (approximately 6 inches) trees of some species— black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*), eastern redcedar, Osage-orange (*Maclura pomifera*) and black walnut— are useful as fence posts because they are naturally rot-resistant and last a long time in the fence line. If you are doing some timber stand improvement and clearing out around other, more valuable, trees anyway, these smaller, unmarketable trees can save you the cost of buying fence posts.

Woodcarvers are always looking for unusual wood. That may be in burls or other odd growths on trees, from unusual branching patterns, or from spiral grooves on branches or small trees caused by vines twisting up them. Some species that would not be considered for any timber purpose, such as flowering dogwood and Osage-orange, have beautiful color and figure (patterns of the growth rings) and are very popular in the crafts market. Much of what might be left behind in the woods from a harvesting operation is marketable in small sections (bolts or blocks) for the woodcarving market.

The raw materials for crafts like these can readily be found in Ky. forests.

Photo courtesy: Doug McLaren

So, get some identification books for medicinal plants, woodland flowers, and mushrooms and walk your woods to see what you have. Even if you have just a few acres of woodland, you may find that there are some little gold mines in there for the taking.

About the Author:

Deborah Hill, Ph.D. *is a forestry extension professor and forestry extension specialist at the University of Kentucky Department of Forestry, she is responsible primarily for programs in non-timber forest products. She also works with 4-H and youth, and in the areas of urban forestry, agroforestry, and permaculture. She has developed landowner programs in Christmas tree and shiitake mushroom production.*

Cooperative Extension Service, Department of Forestry, University of Kentucky, 104 Thomas Poe Cooper Building, Lexington, KY 40546-0073; E-mail: dbhill@uky.edu; Phone: 859.257.7610; Fax: 859.323.1031.