

# Go Wild

*Look to your backyard, local forests, and even cracks in the sidewalk to forage an array of edibles.*

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estled in the Appalachian foothills just outside of Pell City, Hollow Spring Farm is a picturesque mix of grassy hollows and dense forest—there's even a babbling creek coming from a natural spring—all growing wild.

Perhaps "farm" is a bit of a misnomer; only one of the property's 84 acres is cultivated (a small field of culinary herbs and a few vegetables).

But that doesn't stop Chris Bennett from harvesting a year-round bounty of delicious food here. The professional forager sells to eateries including Hot & Hot Fish Club, Satterfield's, Bettola, Highlands Bar & Grill and Little Savannah.

Bennett is no back-to-the-land survivalist; he's a trained chef who worked at high-end restaurants in Chicago and Richmond, Va., before returning to the farm where he grew up about four years ago.

"There's so much stuff all around us," Bennett says. Hollow Spring yields a wide array of fruits, vegetables, herbs and even mushrooms, but you don't need acres of pastoral land to take advantage. "Even in the city—it's growing in sidewalks, yards, parks," he says.

He's not kidding: There's a patch of wood sorrel, an herb that looks similar to clover and has a sharp, lemony tang, growing near Rojo on Highland Avenue. If you have a backyard, you can almost be assured of finding some pungent field onions. Practically every public park

in town boasts at least one acorn-bearing oak tree. And that's not to mention the wealth of wild ginger, hickory nuts, black walnuts, fox grapes and more you'll find if you venture into the woods. Heck, even kudzu—both its blossoms and its young leaves—is edible.

Mushrooms might be what most people first think of when they talk about foraging, but, unfortunately, the climate in Alabama isn't as hospitable to tasty wild fungi as it is in the cooler, wetter Northwest. Bennett says it's possible to find a few chanterelles, black trumpets, oysters and other delicacies in these parts, but they tend to be "in the deepest, nastiest part of the woods."

But take solace that some unique flavors are easier to find. Wild persimmon trees, for example, are native to the southern United States, and their fruit is just coming into season now. (Hunters should know how to

**LEFT: Professional forager Chris Bennett shows writer Jason Horn the array of edibles growing wild at Hollow Spring Farm in Pell City. ABOVE: Field onions, wild grape vines, wild persimmons and wild ginger are among the goods Bennett forages and then sells to a number of Birmingham's fine restaurants.**



identify these—deer tend to congregate around them throughout the hunting season.) The tiny red-orange orbs—the largest are about the size of a ping-pong ball—have a more intense sweetness than their cultivated cousins, with a lovely cinnamon-spice note. Just be sure not to eat them until they're completely mushy in texture: Unripe wild persimmons have a mouth-puckering astringency.

Perhaps the most surprising taste you can forage near Birmingham is the maypop. Also called the purple passionflower, this vine is a relative of the passionfruit, and Birmingham is right in the heart of its southeastern native habitat. In the summer, it produces huge, ornate purple flowers that turn into leathery, egg-shaped fruits in the fall that are ripe when they begin to turn from green to yellow-orange. Crack one open (it makes a loud pop—thus the name) to find a mass of seeds surrounded by pearls of slightly goopy flesh. To eat them, suck the flesh off the inedible seed and spit it out. It's a lot of work, but the flavor—a mixture of grape, banana, pineapple and (honest!) gummy bear, followed by a tart finish—is unlike anything you've eaten before.

None of this is to say you should run out and eat anything you find in your yard or the woods. "If you don't know what it is, don't put it in your mouth," Bennett says. There are poisonous and otherwise dangerous things out there, especially mushrooms. For new foragers, Bennett says the most important rule is to know what poison ivy looks like. "It's everywhere here in Alabama," he says. (For the record, it's a short plant with groups of three slightly shiny, teardrop-shaped green or red leaves that grows on the edge of fields and forests.)

Your best bet is to use the internet or a botanical reference book to identify plants. Bennett has a few favorites: *Nature's Garden* and *The Forager's Harvest* by Samuel Thayer, *Identifying*

and *Harvesting Edible and Medicinal Plants in Wild (and Not So Wild) Places* by "Wildman" Steve Brill and Evelyn Dean and *Wildflowers of Tennessee, the Ohio Valley and the Southern Appalachians* by Dennis Horn and Tavia Catchart. He also offers monthly foraging classes at Hollow Spring Farm. (The next one is Nov. 19; for more info, email hollowspring@hotmail.com.)

So take a step outside, look down, and you just may find something delicious. But beware; it's easy to get hooked. "Once I figure out what something is," Bennett says, "I start seeing it everywhere."

**ABOVE: Wood sorrel, field onions, maypops and wild grapes foraged by Chris Bennett at Hollow Spring Farm in Pell City.**

# Wild fall edibles you can find around Birmingham

## Acorns

**Look for:** An oak tree between late summer and winter.

Acorns come in many shapes and sizes, but all are produced by oak trees, and all are edible.

**How to eat:** Crack open the outer shell by whacking with the side of a knife (just like you would to peel garlic). Boil the meats inside in several changes of water to remove bitter tannins, then dry in a low oven. Use chopped acorns in soups or in place of nuts, or grind into flour for earthy cakes, breads and pastas.

## Black walnuts

**Look for:** Hard, round, green fruits the size of a lime or tennis ball on the ground around walnut trees from late September into November.

**How to eat:** Peel off the outer husk (use gloves, as this can stain your skin), then dry the nuts inside for 10 to 20 minutes in a 200° oven. Crack open and use like normal walnuts.

## Maypop

**Look for:** Vines growing on fences or other vertical surfaces bearing large purple flowers in the summer and green or yellow-orange fruits the size and shape of an egg in early fall.

**How to eat:** Break open the leathery fruits and suck the flavorful pulp off the seeds inside. Spit out the seeds.

## Field onions

**Look for:** Clumps of dark-green, chive-like plants growing in backyards or open fields from early fall through the beginning of summer.

**How to eat:** Use the pungent plant (and its tiny bulbs) in place of onion, garlic, shallot or chives. But be sparing; the garlicky flavor is intense.

## Wild ginger

**Look for:** A single heart-shaped leaf growing on sloped

ground in the spring, summer or fall.

**How to eat:** Wild ginger's thin, spindly roots are delicious candied or in place of cultivated ginger in baked goods or Asian dishes.

## Wild persimmon

**Look for:** Trees with bark similar to a dogwood, sprouting small, round, red-orange fruits. The fruit is ripe when completely mushy, between October and late November.

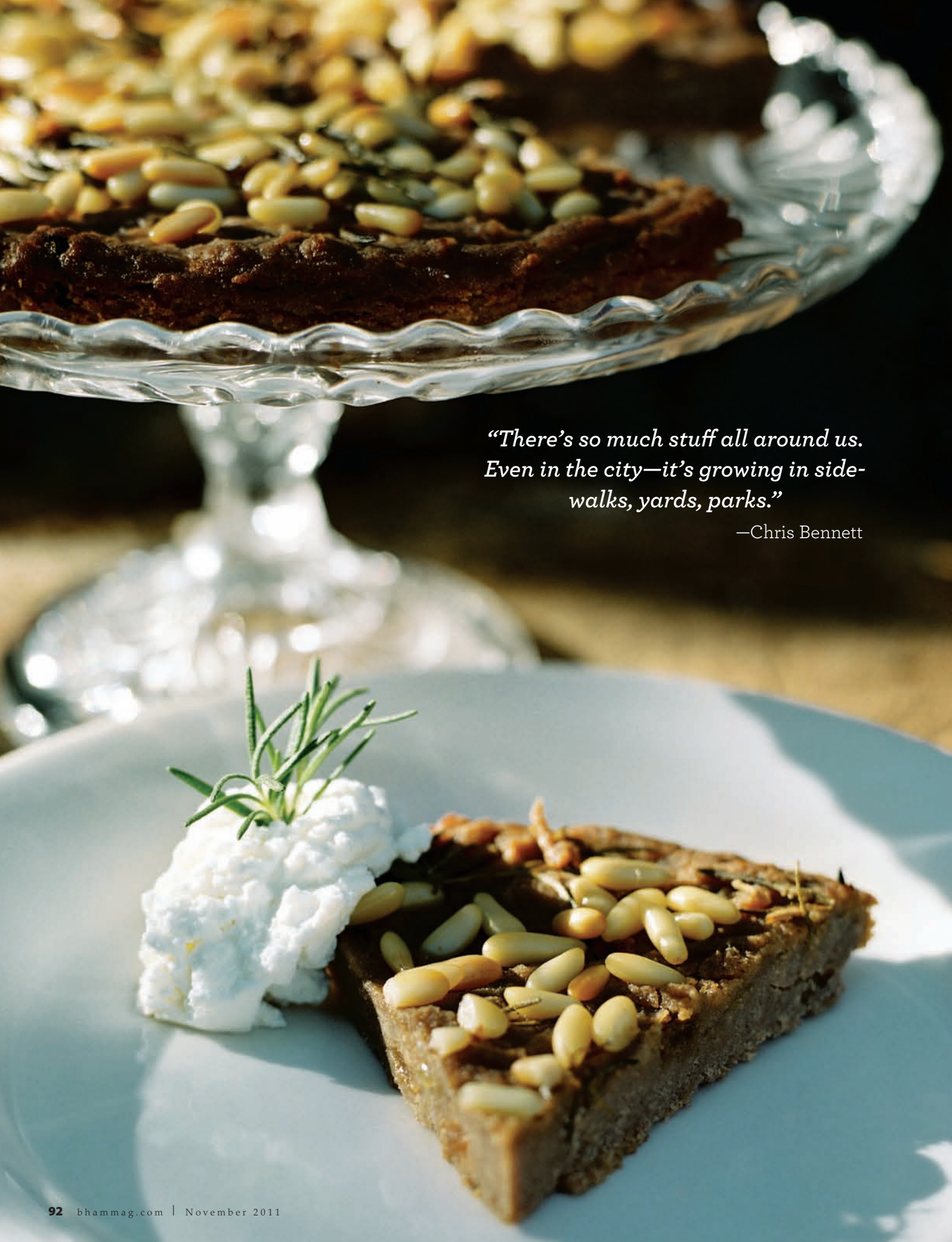
**How to eat:** Pair sweet wild persimmon pulp with rich meats like pork belly or duck, make it into jam or chutney, or just eat it with a spoon.

## Wood sorrel

**Look for:** Small, clover-like leaves with tiny yellow flowers growing along sidewalks from late spring to early fall.

**How to eat:** Use as a garnish or in a mixed-green salad.





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walks, yards, parks.”*

—Chris Bennett

## **Pan-Seared Duck Breasts with Spinach and Persimmon Chutney**

*If using wild persimmons for this recipe, make sure to choose fruits that are completely mushy inside and don't taste astringent—otherwise, they will give the chutney an unpleasant flavor.*

**¾ cup cider or rice vinegar**  
**1 small onion, chopped**  
**½ tart apple, such as Granny Smith, peeled, cored and chopped**  
**¼ cup brown sugar**  
**Juice of 1 lime**  
**1 jalapeño chile, minced**  
**½-inch piece fresh ginger, peeled and minced**  
**1 garlic clove, minced**  
**1 tsp. mustard powder**  
**1½ cups wild persimmon pulp (or 2 large or 3 medium ripe persimmons, peeled and chopped)**  
**2 tbsp. brandy**  
**12 oz. spinach or other tender, leafy green, thick stems removed and roughly chopped**  
**4 skin-on duck breasts**

1. Bring the first 9 ingredients (through mustard powder) to a boil in a medium saucepan over high heat, stirring frequently. Reduce the heat to low, and simmer until the onion and apple are very soft and the mixture has thickened somewhat, about 20 minutes. Add the persimmon and brandy, and simmer until the persimmon is tender, about 5 minutes more. Remove from the heat, and set aside. (You can make the chutney up to 3 days ahead; store in the refrigerator and reheat before serving.)
2. Bring a pot of salted water to a boil over high heat and add the greens. Cook until fully wilted, about 1 to 2 minutes. Drain, and set aside.
3. Heat a skillet over medium-high heat until very hot. Score the skin of the duck breasts in a cross-hatch pattern, and season on both sides with salt and pepper. Cook skin-side-down until much of the fat has rendered, and the skin is browned and crisp, about 5 minutes. Flip the duck over and cook until medium-rare or desired doneness (3 to 4 minutes for medium-rare). Remove to a plate, cover, and let rest for 5 minutes.
4. Pour off all but 1 to 2 tablespoons of the duck fat and drippings. Add the greens and cook for 30 seconds to 1 minute. Season to taste with salt and pepper.
5. Divide the greens among four plates and place 1 duck breast, sliced thinly at a 45-degree angle, on top of each. Top with persimmon chutney.

## **Savory Toasted-Walnut Quick Bread**

**1¼ cups walnuts, shelled and chopped**  
**1 cup (4.5 oz.) all-purpose flour**  
**1 cup (4.5 oz.) whole-wheat flour**  
**2 tsp. baking powder**  
**1 Tbsp. sugar**  
**1 tsp. ground cinnamon**  
**¼ tsp. ground nutmeg**  
**½ tsp. salt**  
**1 egg**  
**1½ cups milk**

1. Preheat the oven to 350°.
2. Heat a small skillet over high heat and add the walnuts. Toast, stirring constantly, until slightly browned and nutty-smelling. Remove from the heat and set aside.
3. Stir together the flours, baking powder, sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg and salt in a large bowl. Beat together the egg and milk in a small bowl. Add the egg mixture to the flour mixture and stir just until combined. Fold in 1 cup of the walnuts.
4. Pour the batter into a well-greased loaf pan and smooth the top with a spatula. Sprinkle the remaining ¼ cup of walnuts on top. Bake at 350° for 40 to 45 minutes or until a knife inserted into the center comes out clean.

## **Acorn Castagnaccio**

*Boiling acorns in several changes of water removes their tannins, getting rid of any bitter flavor.*

**8 oz. shelled wild acorns (may substitute 8 oz. chestnut flour, available locally at Organic Harvest in Hoover)**  
**⅓ cup raisins**  
**1 Tbsp. sugar**  
**1 pinch salt**  
**5 tbsp. olive oil, divided**  
**¼ cup pine nuts**  
**Leaves from 1 or 2 rosemary sprigs**

1. If using acorns, place them in a medium saucepan and add water to cover. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, drain, and discard the water. Repeat 4 to 6 more times, or until the acorns lose their bitter, astringent flavor. Chop the acorns, spread on a baking sheet and bake at 200° until completely dry, about 2 hours. Grind in a food processor or spice grinder until the consistency of flour or fine cornmeal.
2. Place the raisins in a small bowl and add hot water to cover. Soak for 30 minutes, drain, and set aside.
3. Preheat the oven to 400°.
4. Sift the acorn or chestnut flour into a medium bowl. Stir in the sugar, salt and 2 Tbsp. olive oil. Add 1 cup of water and stir to combine. Stir in enough additional water (½ to 1 cup) to create a thick batter. Fold in the reserved raisins.
5. Coat the bottom and sides of an 8-inch cake pan or 8x8-inch baking dish with 2 Tbsp. olive oil. Pour in the batter, sprinkle with the pine nuts and rosemary, and drizzle with the remaining 1 Tbsp. olive oil. Bake until the top surface is covered with cracks but the interior is still soft and moist, about 30 to 35 minutes.
6. Serve the cake warm with fresh ricotta and a glass of dessert wine. ●

**LEFT: Acorn Castagnaccio. RIGHT: Pan-Seared Duck Breasts with Spinach and Persimmon Chutney.**

