

## Let your imagination run wild

### In Your Backyard Woods

**B**erries, nuts, and tangles of plants grow in your backyard woods. But did you know that many of these things can be used in your home or sold? They have decorative value and, yes, may even have economic value. The term “special forest product” is used to describe things generated from plants or fungi that you can harvest in your woods, including these:



Barry Runk/Grant Heilman Photography

**Foods**—mushrooms, nuts, fruits, and sap;

**Medicinals**—parts of herbs, shrubs, and trees;

**Decoratives**—stems, branches, flowers, cones, and buds;

**Handicrafts**—bark, burls, conks, and stems.

On some sites, special forest products are more valuable than timber products! Your woods can yield many special items. Take a few hours to walk through your woods to look for them; then let your imagination run wild!



Bill Beatty, Wild and Natural

#### **Foods**

Berries, wild fruit, mushrooms, nuts, and maple syrup are a few examples of the many food items that may grow in your woods. Berries and other fruits can be harvested 2 to 3 years after planting. Mushrooms may be edible or poisonous, so learn to tell the difference! Nuts commonly used for food and commercial purposes include beechnut, hazelnut, golden chinquapin, hickory, pecan, pinyon pine, and black walnut.



Paul Wray, Iowa State University  
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Peggy Castillo

Maple syrup is made by boiling maple tree sap until it thickens into sweet syrup. Sugar maple is the primary maple used to make syrup, although black, red, and silver maple can also be used. About 30 to 40 gallons of sap are needed to make 1 gallon of pure maple syrup.



Stephen Bratkovich

Shiitake mushrooms can be grown on logs cut during the dormant season from decay-free trees.

#### **Medicinals**

Your backyard woods may contain plants that can be used for medicinal purposes. About 25 percent of all medicines used in the United States contain active ingredients extracted from plants. Over 100 trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants—which are thought to have medicinal benefits, but have not been proven safe by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration—are currently sold as dietary supplements. Ginseng and goldenseal are examples of two popular dietary supplements.

#### **Decoratives**

You can decorate your home with stems, branches, cones, vines, leaves, and small plants found in your backyard woods. You can also sell them to craft stores or craft wholesalers. Some products include wreaths, dry floral arrangements, and fresh floral displays.

#### **Did You Know . . . ?**

Pioneers made a coffee substitute by roasting seeds of the Kentucky coffeetree.



## In the Forest

People gathered special forest products in the woods long before they harvested timber. The most popular gathering places today are Federal, State, and other public forests. Many forests sell permits and provide information on how to identify and harvest special forest products. Some public forests are even managed specifically for them. Foresters manage these lands to increase the quantity and quality of the products, to control the harvest, and to prevent damage to the forest.

## Handicrafts

The woods in your backyard may also contain a host of material that can be handcrafted by you or sold to crafters to make objects ranging from pencils to walking sticks. Parts of trees such as limbs, branches, twigs, bark, and knotholes can all be used to produce things of beauty.



Harian Petersen, University of Minnesota Extension Service



Larry Lefever, Grant Heilman Photography

*Marketing matters, especially with special forest products. Markets can vary from roadside stands to international markets. They are usually “niche” markets, small and very specialized.*

## Family Activity: Bird Cone Treats

Pick up some cones from your woods with your family. Examine one of the cones closely. Where is the food that a squirrel wants? Carefully pull a seed out of the cone, showing where the seed is located. Explain that the woody cone is just the vehicle that seeds ride in. (Note: Depending on the time of year, cones may have already released their seeds.)

You'll need:

- Vegetable shortening
- Peanut butter
- Birdseed (black oil sunflower seeds or a blend with other seeds)
- String or yarn

Cones can be made into many decorations that beautify your home. But they also make great bird feeders! Take a cone and attach string or yarn as a hanger. Dip the cone in a blended mixture of peanut butter and shortening (1 part to 1 part). Next, roll the cone in birdseed. Place your cone treat on a tree or bush, and watch birds come from near and far to enjoy the combination of fats and protein. You may even wish to decorate an entire tree for the birds during the holidays!

