

FORAGE & FEAST: BLACKTHORN

OUR RECIPE GUIDES SHOW YOU HOW TO CREATE FANTASTIC FORAGED FEASTS OUT OF NATURALLY-FOUND INGREDIENTS.

BLACKTHORN (PRUNUS SPINOSA)

Sloes are the fruit produced by the blackthorn and in the foraging world we do not call them blackthorn berries, always sloes. Trying one straight from the bush is interesting; they are acrid, drying the mouth quickly and very, very bitter. By picking the berries after the first frost the bitterness is lessened due to sugars being released during the thawing process. If you do not get a frost and the berries look ripe then you can always put them in the freezer overnight and this will do the same thing.



Habitat: A plant of traditional hedgerows where in some parts can be locally abundant. It is also found in open woodland, woodland edges and parks.

Distribution: Blackthorn can be found in its native Europe and western Asia as well as parts of Africa. It is widely planted in parks and can be found across Greater Manchester.

Description: Blackthorn is a large deciduous shrub which can grow to nearly 5m. It produces flowers in the spring which are small and have a subtle scent (almond). Unusually for plants it produces flowers before the leaves, so in the spring a blackthorn will be covered in flowers with no leaves, the leaves appear about a month or so later. The much sought-after sloes appear in the autumn and are about the size of a marble. They are blue and can be covered with a light blue bloom (this can be washed off in the rain or when handled). The branches are covered in long, sharp thorns and care should be taken when picking the berries.

When's it in season: Flowers can appear as early as March but traditionally blossom in April. The sloes appear in the autumn but folklore dictates that they should not be picked until the first frost.

Edible bits and uses: The sloes are one of the most sought-after items in the foraging world to make one thing with, **sloe gin**. They can also be infused in vinegar to make delicious flavoured vinegar. The sloes (which are similar to very small plums) have a stone in the middle. They have a plum-like taste but are very bitter straight from the bush. The flowers are edible and taste like almond. Sloes are rich in vitamin C, tannins and fruit acids. Dried sloes were used to treat kidney stones and bladder problems. The flowers, which can be used in a herbal tea, have a diuretic effect.

Folklore: Blackthorn is associated illness, death and warfare, and according to **Christian folklore** it is associated with witches and seen as a sinister tree. In Scotland in 1670 Major Thomas Weir was burned as a witch along with his most powerful tool, a blackthorn staff.

Ideas: Sloe gin has been a tried and tested recipe for generations and is a way of making the bitter berries release their natural sugars and flavours. A sloe gin jelly can be made using the soaked berries left over from the gin making process and boiling them up, straining and then mixing with sugar to make a rather adult jam for the toast in morning.

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SLOE GIN RECIPE

For this recipe you could use vodka if you do not like gin and it will be just as yummy. Take time to pierce the sloes before you put them in the jar, this will help the gin or vodka to infuse the flavour of the sloes.

70cl bottle of gin or vodka

1 litre or 1.5 litre jar with lid

500g of sloes (or enough to half fill the jar you are using)

300g of sugar (or to taste)

- 1. Fill a 1 litre or 1.5 litre jar (the ones with the clips like a kilner jar) half full of sloes.** Add 300g of sugar (more or less depending how sweet you like your liquors) then pour in 70cl of gin or vodka. Use a gin or vodka you like. Some people use cheap stuff but then don't be surprised if your liquor tastes 'cheap'.
- 2. Shake well** (ensuring the lids on). Shake every other day for two weeks then whenever you remember. The theory is it will be ready in time for Christmas, but in the first year make two and leave one for the following year (hard to resist). This will allow it to mature for a richer flavour.
- 3. Strain through muslin** and decant into a nice clean bottle ready to enjoy.

This recipe can be adapted to all sorts- blackberry whisky, damson vodka, elderberry brandy the list is as long as your imagination! Just replace the sloes with another berry (or a mixture) and add the spirit of your choosing, sweeten to taste...it is that simple!

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