

Black Walnut – A Tough Nut To Crack, But Worth It!

by Russ Cohen

Editors note: Russ Cohen is the author of Wild Plants I Have Known... and Eaten, published by Greenbelt and available for purchase on our web site (www.ecga.org) or at the Greenbelt headquarters. Cohen, one of the region's foremost experts on wild edible plants, has compiled more than 35 years of learning, practicing and teaching about wild foods foraging into this informative book. Greenbelt is very grateful to Russ for generously donating all proceeds from the book to Greenbelt to be used towards land conservation efforts.



The Black Walnut tree (*Juglans nigra*) is well-known and appreciated over much of the United States, especially in Missouri and the Midwest, where it is commercially grown and harvested. However, not that many people around these parts are

familiar with it, and fewer still have experienced the distinctive taste of the ripe nuts. These nuts admittedly present a formidable challenge to process and open, but their unusual and assertive flavor has no counterpart, and you may find it to be well worth the trouble.

Although Black Walnuts are not native to Essex County or Massachusetts – their natural range is to the south and west of here – the trees can be found here and there throughout the region. One place I have seen them is near old farmsteads, where they may have been planted in the erroneous belief that they repelled insects. I have also encountered the trees in thickly-settled residential neighborhoods.

Black Walnut trees tend to leaf out later than most local species, and are hard to recognize when dormant. Unlike Shagbark Hickory's distinctively shaggy bark, the bark of Black Walnut trees is hard to distinguish from other species. Their pinnately-compound leaves also bear a strong resemblance to those of several other species, like Sumac or Ailanthus. One way to confirm the identity of a tree as a Black Walnut is to "scratch and sniff" the central stem of a leaf. If it's a Black Walnut, you will notice a spicy aroma, which is identical to the smell of the husks surrounding the nuts. (If the smell is only faintly spicy, chances are that you have encountered a Butternut tree (*Juglans cinerea*), also known as "White Walnut" because of its lighter-colored wood.)

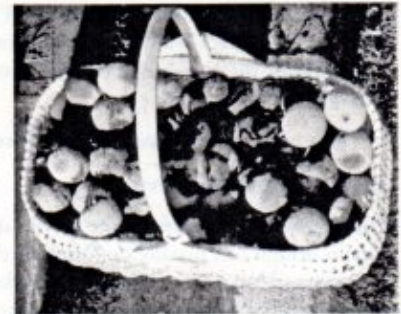
The main edible product of Black Walnut trees are the ripe nuts, which are in season in this area in October. The nuts are surrounded by a spherical, green husk about 2 1/2 inches in diameter – about the same size and diameter as an old, green

tennis ball. (Butternut husks are the same size and shape as a green goose egg.)

Black Walnut trees will often drop some if not all their leaves before their nuts, which makes the nuts easy to spot. Wait until the nuts drop off the tree to harvest, but don't wait too long, or the squirrels will beat you to them. A typical Black Walnut tree produces dozens if not hundreds of nuts, which won't all ripen and fall off the tree at the same time, so you can typically gather a bunch of nuts and then return a week or so later to get those that have fallen in the meantime.

The first step in processing black walnuts is to remove the outer husks from the shells. This is admittedly an unpleasant task, as the inside of a fresh husk is yellowish and juicy, and touching this inner husk pulp with your bare hands will stain them brown for several weeks. Partially-rotted husks will be yellow with brown spots on the outside. On the inside, you will find black pulp that can also stain your skin. Sometimes the decaying husks are colonized by fly larvae, which is understandably off-putting. Don't let them bother you as their presence does not in any way affect the nut inside the shell. (One fringe benefit to this is that the nastiness of the husk is such that most property owners around here consider the nuts a nuisance, and are more than happy to have you take as many as you want).

One technique to remove the husks is to roll out your gathered nuts on pavement and drive over them several times. The technique I use is simply to stomp on the husks where I find them under the tree, and then roll them around under my shoe to remove the husk.



Once you've got most of the husks off, remove any residue still clinging to the shells by filling a five-gallon plastic bucket about halfway with nuts, then adding water until the bucket is 3/4 full; stir vigorously with a stick to rub off the remaining husk bits. Repeat if necessary.

The next step is to spread out the de-husked nuts on a cool dry surface (newspaper on a garage floor works well) so they can thoroughly dry for at least several weeks; the nut meats will be tastier and easier to shell when dry. Unshelled, dry Black Walnuts will stay fresh in a dry location for several months or longer. Once shelled, however, they should be eaten within a week, or refrigerated or frozen to preserve freshness.

Black Walnut shells are notoriously hard to crack open. The shells are in fact so hard that they are used commercially as an industrial abrasive. While they will break most

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conventional nut crackers, a vise or hammer works fine.

Black Walnuts have a robust and aromatic flavor, considerably different from and much stronger than the cultivated, store-bought "English" (actually Persian) Walnut. Black Walnuts would not work well in any recipe that requires the nut flavor to fade into the background, because it won't. (Butternuts have a milder flavor.) On the other hand, Black Walnuts do work in recipes without competing flavors.

One easy and tasty way to use Black Walnuts is to make Black Walnut Honey Butter. Here's the simple recipe:

Black Walnut Honey Butter

2 cups Black Walnut nut meats
3/8 tsp. salt
3 1/2 Tbsp. honey

(Feel free to vary these proportions to suit your taste.)

Spread the nut meats on a baking tray and gently roast in a regular or toaster oven at 200° F for 1/2 hour, taking care not to burn or overcook the nut meats.

Combine the roasted nut meats, salt and honey in a food processor and blend for several minutes until peanut butter-like in texture. Makes approximately 12 ounces.

Serve the nut butter warm to show off its unique fragrance. The aromatic black walnuts, saltiness of the salt and the sweetness of the honey will delight your taste buds with three pleasing flavors at once.

For a more challenging recipe, I recommend this one:

Black Walnut Baklava

You'll need a pastry brush and phyllo dough for this recipe. Phyllo dough can usually be found in the frozen foods section of most supermarkets. Thaw out the dough overnight in the refrigerator or for five hours at room temperature; leave it in the box until you are ready to use.

Preheat oven to 325°F. Butter the bottom and sides of a 9" X 13" baking pan. Coarsely chop (or finely grind, according to your preference) 3 cups of black walnuts. You might want to lightly toast the nuts first to help bring out their aroma and help retain their crunchiness.

In a small bowl, stir together:

1/4 cup sugar
1 tsp. grated lemon zest
1/2 tsp. ground cinnamon

Melt 1/2 lb. (two sticks) of butter. Roll out the phyllo dough on a smooth work surface. Trim half the phyllo into 9" X 13" inch sheets, then put the remaining dough back in the package and save for another use. Place two sheets at a time into the bottom of the baking pan, then brush with melted butter. Repeat this twice for a total of six sheets; then sprinkle on top of that half of the chopped nuts and half of the sugar/lemon zest/cinnamon mixture. Lay down another 3 pairs of sheets, brushing each pair with melted

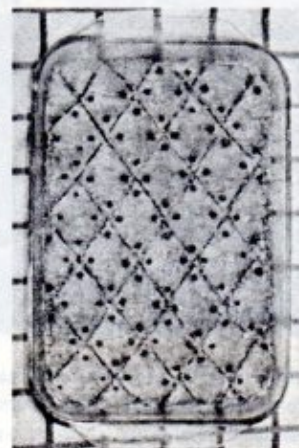
butter before putting down the next. Sprinkle over them the remaining nuts and sugar/lemon zest/cinnamon mixture. Cover that with all the remaining phyllo sheets (one pair at a time, brushing each pair with melted butter before applying the next). Brush the top with the remaining butter.

Using a sharp serrated knife, cut through all the layers to make 2"-wide diamonds or squares (make sure to do this before baking). Pin down each cut corner with a whole clove; you'll need about 1 1/2 Tbsp. of whole cloves for this task. Bake at 325°F for 30 minutes, then reduce temperature to 300°F and continue to bake until the baklava is golden brown, about 30-60 minutes.

In the meantime, combine the following five ingredients in a saucepan:

1/2 cup sugar
1 cup water
3/4 cup honey
1 Tbsp. fresh lemon juice
Zest (outside peel removed in large strips) of one orange

Bring this mixture to a gentle boil and then simmer, uncovered, for 15 minutes. Strain the hot syrup and pour evenly over the baked baklava. Allow to cool completely (at least four hours) to room temperature before serving.



I'll wrap up this article with some miscellaneous tidbits:

- Ⓢ Black Walnut nut meats are low in saturated fats, high in unsaturated (i.e., healthy) fats, and contain significant amounts of protein, Vitamins A, iron, minerals and fiber.
- Ⓢ Sometimes people make pickles from immature Black Walnuts or Butternuts (e.g., when a strong storm blows them off the trees). If a knitting needle can be pushed through one of the nuts, they are young and tender enough to be pickled.
- Ⓢ Both Black Walnut and Butternut trees contain sap which can be boiled down for syrup (but maple syrup is much tastier).
- Ⓢ Black Walnut husks provide one of the few natural dyes that do not require any mordant (fixative). The dye results in a light brown color.
- Ⓢ The wood of black walnut is dark brown in color, easily worked, and is highly prized by furniture makers, and therefore commands a premium price.
- Ⓢ Both Black Walnut and Butternut roots, nut husks, and leaves secrete an allelopathic substance into the soil called juglone that inhibits the growth of some plant species, so you might want to exercise caution in composting your nut husks, or planting your vegetable garden within close proximity to either of these tree species.