

So here's how I do it:

First there is the matter of seed collection, so I can have sufficient raw material to grow plants from. (FYI: most of plant propagating I do is from seed, to maintain genetic diversity in the plants I am growing, versus creating plants from divisions or cuttings, where the “offspring” plants are genetically identical to their source plants.) My 5+ decades of being out in nature, searching for things to nibble on, helps inform me where to look for seed. In many cases, the same wild edibles I was already foraging for (Beach Plums, for instance) contain the seeds I could grow plants from, so one collecting trip brings in the edibles plus the seed. In other cases, where the ripe seed is not the part of the plant I would collect for eating (Sassafras, e.g.), I would need to keep track of seed ripening dates as a separate activity. And, for the species I want to grow but have not been able to gather seed for myself, I will obtain from other sources, such as the Maine-based [Wild Seed Project](#).

Next is the challenge of seed storage. I purchased a small refrigerator, which I keep in my basement, and that is where I store most of the seed I have collected myself, or get from other sources. This is where the seed stays, until I sow it myself or pass along to others. As you (probably) know, the seed of most native species need to be subjected to an extended period of cold temperature in order to remain viable and break dormancy. The technical term for this is “stratification”. Some people (including me) skip this step entirely, and just sow some seed outside, and let Mother Nature provide the cold temperatures the seeds need.

The next step is to try to grow plants from the seed I have. I have found a tremendous range of difficulty in doing

this, depending on the species. Some seed is easy to germinate and grow out into plants; others are very challenging. Take the genus *Viburnum*, for example, which has at least six species native to the Northeast that are edible by people. I have found Highbush Cranberry to be exceedingly easy to grow; the seeds sprout in the fridge, in their little storage bags, and grow well once they are sown, indoors or out. Wild Raisin is very similar. Nannyberry also grows fairly readily from seed. At the other end of the difficulty scale is Hobblebush, which, despite my prolonged efforts, and trying to sow many seeds, under a variety of conditions, I have gotten very little positive results from. (It is a great species, though, so I will keep trying.)



Wild Raisin (*Viburnum nudum*), one of the *Viburnum* species with edible fruits, is relatively easy to grow from seed.

Flats of sown seed and seedlings, insulated under a blanket of snow. This is an ideal situation, which is unfortunately less reliable with our changing climate.



My last step, before the plants get planted in their permanent locations, is to grow them out in my nursery to a size where they are suitable for planting. Once again, this is greatly variable depending on the species. Some plants, like Wild Strawberry, can be started indoors in the winter, and grow big enough so that by May they can be planted out. Other species, Juneberry and Hackberry for example, need to be kept in the nursery for several years until they are big enough to survive on their own. In the meantime, you need to keep your nursery plants alive, with sufficient moisture, especially in the warmer months (a challenge in 2022 but not in 2023) and insulation in the colder months (natural snow cover is ideal, but barring that, covering them with an insulating layer of leaves, wood chips and/or fabric, or to be extra protective, bring them indoors; even an unheated garage should be sufficient). Last but not least; you may need to defend your plants against ravenous rodents, rabbits and deer; I deploy a lot of ½ " mesh metal hardware cloth in my nursery for that purpose.

Once the plants in my nursery are ready to be planted out, then it is time to find good homes for them. Fortunately, my many years of work to protect open space and riparian areas have firmly established my "conservation cred", and many of the land trusts, watershed associations, state agencies and other groups I interacted with while working are open to the idea of collaborating with me in incorporating edible native plantings on their lands or as part of other projects they are working on. Furthermore, many of these and other groups interested in my leading wild edibles walks on their properties are amenable to my suggestions for additional edible native species that, while not currently present on the properties, could do well if planted there. Then, if some of those plants are planted there, and I then led a wild edibles walk there, I would have more to talk about.

Among the most edifying and gratifying experiences I have had since taking on the "Johnny Appleseed for edible natives" role eight years ago has been listening to and learning from indigenous people, and my ongoing efforts to initiate and nurture respectful and reciprocal

relationships with local tribes and tribal members. I have had the great honor and privilege to be invited to walk tribal lands with tribal people, to share what I know about the edible plants already growing there. I freely acknowledge that much of what I have learned about which plants are edible, and when, where and how to harvest them sustainably, and how to tend the landscapes where they grow, originated with indigenous people. I view sharing what I know as an opportunity to restore right relationship with the land and its gifts, and welcome the opportunity to return the knowledge to its original source: the descendants of the people who figured it all out in the first place. I am also extremely grateful to have been able to give plants from my nursery directly to tribal members, which I hope will help repair and revive landscapes with native species and enable a rekindling of the long heritage of respectful and reciprocal plant-people relationships.

So, once a land trust, town or other landowner or manager agrees to collaborate with me on a project, here's the methodology I typically follow:

First, I walk the site with a clipboard, taking note of the edible wild plants (non-natives as well as natives) already present on the site, as well as make observations of the plant community type(s) present. I then consult my compilation of the edible native species of this region, and make up a list of suggestions for native edible species to plant at the site, i.e., recommendations for further diversification of the site with species that, while I did not observe them on my reconnaissance site walk, I think could do well at the site were they to be planted there. To do this I draw upon my 5+ decades of being out in nature and noticing which plant species

like to grow in association with each other. For example; most of the time I spot Pokeweed in the landscape, I see Black Raspberry growing next to it. So I am confident that if I saw one but not the other, I could plant the other nearby and it would do well. The same goes for wintergreen and partridgeberry.

Once the site manager has reviewed the list and accepted (some or all of) my recommendations, then we figure out when and where to source the plants (if I don't have everything already in my nursery), when and where to plant them, and lining up staff and/or volunteers to help plant the plants, and what additional measures may be needed to help ensure the success of the plantings (e.g., fencing to deter herbivory, post-planting watering until the plants are established, etc.). We also determine the cost of any additional plant purchases (i.e., in addition to plants I'd donate from my nursery) as well as the cost (if any) and sourcing of related materials such as mulch, compost, fencing, etc., and how this might correspond to the availability of funds (if any) to cover these costs.

As part of this process, I walk the site again to identify planting locations for the new plants, and mark those locations with stakes or flags. That way I know just how many plants of which species I will need for that site. In determining those locations, I usually pick spots along trails and pathways, and in/adjacent to entrance parking lots, where site visitors are likely to encounter them. This also makes sense for practicality's sake, as the plants can usually be easily transported to these relatively accessible locations (by wheelbarrow, e.g.), and it is easier for staff/volunteers to periodically monitor their condition and take remedial action if necessary. I am usually looking for opportunities to judiciously insert a

plant or two here and there, within the existing matrix of plants, so that, once the new plants are established, they fit/blend right into the landscape, and (more or less) appear as if they have always been there. I also look for opportunities, where they exist, to do strategic “one for one” swaps, where an invasive plant (such as a buckthorn, multifloral rose, or

Prior to the planting date, I and/or the site owner/manager and its staff/volunteers, will undertake site prep as necessary to facilitate planting on the planting day. This may include pre-digging some or all of the holes into which the plants will be planted, and removing invasive species and/or other competing vegetation. Then, on the pre-arranged date(s),



honeysuckle) can be popped out and a native plant inserted in its place. So I am usually not designing and planting whole landscapes from scratch, but merely adding a few plants here and there to an existing already-vegetated site.

usually scheduled in early-to-mid spring or mid-to-late fall (the optimal seasonal windows for planting), I show up with plants from my nursery, and additional plants procured from elsewhere, and we plant them that day, or the site owner/manager plants them with their staff and/or volunteers shortly thereafter.

△ Russ, with a wheelbarrow-full of plants from his nursery, ready to plant them at a paddler access campsite along the Connecticut River in Montague, MA, jointly developed by the MA Department of Conservation and Recreation and the Appalachian Mountain Club. *Photo by Bridget MacDonald.*