



Lifestyle



Photos by Laura Hunt Angel

Tiny wild strawberries turn red well before they ripen.

TRICKS OF THE EYE

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

When I was about 13 years old, our neighbor, Harry, retired from the Fleetwood plant in Detroit. Shortly afterward, he sold his house and land to my sister, Gina. The house was about the same age as our own, having been built shortly after World War II, and it had never been updated. Most of the walls were covered with varying shades of wooden panels. Just off the kitchen was a large enclosure that was mostly unused space. The kitchen stove ran on propane and connected through the wall to a pair of tanks that leaned up against the house.

Straight off the front entry was a set of hand-built stairs. At the top of the stairs was a large, wood-paneled attic space, hidden by a set of curtains. In an effort to make the attic a little more like a room, Harry had built walls along both sides where the roofline met the floor. These walls created two equal sized pockets the length of the attic that were used for storage.

THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE ATTIC

My sister planned to renovate the house eventually, but immediately after buying it she simply wanted to get moved in and put things away. Thinking that the two long closets would be perfect for storing Christmas decorations and other rarely used items, she grabbed a



Fool little ones with this sweet, fruity salsa that looks like the real thing.

flashlight and began carrying boxes up the stairs.

Alone in the attic, she opened the door to one of the closets, but, unable to see into the darkness, she turned on the flashlight and pointed the narrow beam into the long, pitch-black space. Staring back at her were dozens of pairs of eyes.

Horror stricken, she quickly closed the door. After a second or two, though, she noticed that no sound emanated from the closet. She carefully opened the door again,

where further inspection revealed what she was actually looking at.

Years before, Harry had taken up the hobby of taxidermy. As his collection grew, he had begun using these two closets to store his specimens. In the hubbub of moving, he'd left both of the closets filled with an assortment of real "stuffed animals" in various states of preservation. One by one, my sister removed raccoons, squirrels and owls from the spaces and piled them into bins for trash collection.

FOOLED YOU

Now is the time for those sweet little tricksters of the plant world, wild strawberries. This time of year, when rain is abundant and temperatures begin to rise, you can spot them in yards, pastures or even along the sidewalks of downtown Madisonville. They're easy to find.

The trick, however, is getting them when they're perfectly ripe. With their bright, Christmas-red color, wild strawberries look ripe well before they're ready to eat. Pop an unripe one into your mouth and you'll pucker up and spit the thing right out, vowing to never try another one. I haven't yet picked more than a palmful at a time that were sweet and ready to eat.

Add to that the fact that these little gems are about the size of blueberries, and you might not think them even worth the trouble of picking at all. However, wild strawberries — when ripe — are some of nature's sweetest gifts. It's all in the timing. The trick is waiting until the berries are perfectly ripe, but before the birds have discovered them.

BACKWOODS BOUNTY HUNTING

Every spring, through some sort of mountain man magic, Daddy managed to go out and find a couple of quarts of wild strawberries for Mama to make into jam. At the time, I had no idea how difficult it could be to gather that many of the tiny fruits. I realize now, of course, that he must have worked pretty hard before picking enough for jam making.

For Daddy, though, a day spent wandering the woods and meadows was never a day wasted. He always returned from those treks relaxed and happy, with a story or two of being scolded by squirrels, or scaring up a covey of quail or whatever other wild creatures he encountered in his wanderings. Sometimes he would let our beagle, Tippy, accompany him. Tippy would usually come dragging in early the next morning, worn out and eyes running from chasing rabbits through the tall grass.

Daddy was much more at ease in the woods than in any city or town. These wild treks were a necessary part of his being, and I truly believe that stopping him would have caused as much harm as preventing a wild bird from flying south for the winter. Mama knew this, and she also knew that Daddy could take care of himself in the woods better than anybody, so she just let him go.

Oftentimes, Daddy's day trips yielded other treasures, too: mushrooms, wild greens or just a handful of flowers for Mama. It was on one of these treks that he found the clump of blackberry brambles in the back acre that pleased Mama to no end.

Being able to spot a fake might just

We all have some type of condition

In the previous decade, I spent six weeks each of three summers as a teacher for the Kentucky Governor's Scholars Program at Bellarmine University in Louisville. We taught enhancement programs that around 1,100 high school juniors applied for — political science, engineering, creative writing, etc. — and in addition we would teach something that just struck our fancy. My three oddball subjects were: water issues, all things China and medievalism. One of my colleagues liked to just pick a word and spend the whole six weeks examining it from every possible angle. I'd like to recommend that we do a short version of that here, on the word "condition."

Linguistics includes a study of word origins, better identified as "etymology" (not to be confused



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NOTABLE NUGGETS

with 'entomology' — the study of insects). The word "condition" comes to us through Middle English, from the Old French condicion (noun), conditionner (verb) — that is, you can find Geoffrey Chaucer using it in these forms, but it originated from Latin condicio(n-) "agreement," from condicere "agree upon," from con- "with" plus dicere "say." So in its earliest avatar, it was a kind of with — saying, a mark of togetherness.

We use it as a verb and a noun. To condition something is to make it ready for use, or to improve it. Anyone like using hair conditioner? As a noun it's a qualifier, one that stipulates about an item, and it suggests a state of being. For example, "the human condition" refers to those things about us that make us human. It was sometimes used humorously

to suggest an emotional state of some sort, as in "law's mercy, he was in such a condition" — something my old uncle Hutch from the Ozarks used to say.

In the current health care discussions, we hear a lot about "pre-existing conditions." The phrase refers to many illnesses and debilities. I, for instance, would fall under the pre-existing condition of heart disease because my father and his father both died of such — regardless of my own healthiness (I just ran a 6K ... okay, ran part of it). If they live long enough, all men are under the pre-existing condition of enlarged prostates. Many women tell me they are under the pre-existing condition of having to put up with men. Instead of holding to its previous usage of binding things and people together, it's being used to divide us, to enforce a bias against some and not others.

Truth told, we all are under pre-existing conditions in that we're mortal.

Perhaps we should heed the warning from Mikey Newbury in 1967, sung by Kenny Rogers: "I Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In)":

(Yeah, yeah, oh-yeah, what condition my condition was in)
I woke up this mornin' with the sundown shinin' in/
I found my mind in a brown paper bag within/
I tripped on a cloud and fell-a eight miles high/
I tore my mind on a jagged sky/
I just dropped in to see what condition my condition was in
(Yeah, yeah, oh-yeah, what condition my condition was in)
I pushed my soul in a deep dark hole and then I followed it in/
I watched myself crawlin' out as I was a-crawlin' in/
I got up so tight I couldn't unwind/
I saw so much I broke my mind/
I just dropped in to see what condition my condition was in
(Yeah, yeah, oh-yeah, what condition my condition was in)
Someone painted "April Fool" in big black letters on a "Dead End" sign/
I had my foot on the gas as I left the road and blew out my mind/
Eight miles outta Memphis and I got no spare
/Eight miles straight up downtown somewhere/
I just dropped in to see what condition my condition was in
I said I just dropped in to see what condition my condition was in
/Yeah yeah oh-yeah
Have a great literary linguistic day!

Scott Vander Ploeg, Ph.D., is a literary critic and 37-year veteran educator who offers to help elucidate the complex and evolving world of the humanities.

TRICKS

FROM PAGE C1

be nature's way of sorting out more intelligent individuals for natural selection. I'm just glad that my sister made the cut.

THE RECIPES

Here are a couple of fun recipes that might come in handy for keeping the kids fed and entertained during summer vacation.

FRUIT SALSA WITH CINNAMON CHIPS

I chose a combination of fruits that would imitate the look of a regular, tomato-based salsa. However, this sweet and tasty blend is also a good way to use up whatever fresh fruit you have on hand. A food processor is handy for this; however, you can also chop the fruit by hand.

1 lb (16-oz) fresh strawberries
1 Granny Smith apple
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1 cup cantaloupe, cubed
1 medium mango, peeled, sliced and cubed
1 cup red raspberries
3 tablespoons raspberry jam
10 flour tortillas
Butter flavor non-stick spray
1/3 cup sugar or substitute
1 teaspoon cinnamon

Wash and hull the strawberries. Cut them in half, or if large, into quarters. Wash the apple and, leaving the peel on, core and cut it into cubes. Toss the apple in the lemon juice to keep it from turning.

Working in small batches to keep the fruit from turning into mush, process each batch of fruit for a couple of seconds, until it's coarsely chopped. As each batch is processed, pour it into a large bowl. When all of the fruit is chopped, add the raspberry jam and stir well. Refrigerate until ready to serve.

FOR THE CHIPS: Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.

Spray each tortilla with butter-flavored spray and lay them on a sheet of waxed paper or plastic wrap.

Combine cinnamon and sugar and sprinkle one side of the tortillas with the mixture. Flip the tortillas over and repeat the process. Stack the tortillas and, using a pizza cutter or sharp knife, cut them into triangle-shaped chips. Scatter the tortillas in a single layer onto cookie sheets and bake for 8-10 minutes or until they're crisp. Cool slightly before serving with the fruit salsa. Serves about 8.

BEAVER TAILS

No, silly! These aren't real beaver tails. They're a wonderful Canadian pastry also known as fried dough. Similar to Cherokee fry bread, these deep-fried delights have somehow never made it much past our northern border. Traditionally topped with cinnamon sugar, they're also delicious with hazelnut-chocolate spread or as the base for a fab ice cream dessert. Kids will love these.

¼ cup warm water
1 package active dry yeast

3 tablespoons sugar
½ cup warm milk
2 eggs, lightly beaten
½ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon vanilla extract
3 tablespoons oil (any except olive oil)
2 ½ cups flour plus extra for dusting
Cinnamon sugar or other favorite toppings
Oil for deep frying

In a large bowl, stir together warm water, yeast and a pinch of the sugar; let

stand for about five minutes or until the yeast is foamy. Add milk, remaining sugar, eggs, salt, vanilla and oil and stir well. Mix in about half of the flour (a wooden spoon works well), then add the remainder and work with hands to blend. Dust a flat surface with a bit of flour, then turn out the dough and knead it for 8-10 minutes or until the dough is smooth and elastic. Place the dough in an oiled bowl, cover and let

it rise until doubled in bulk. Punch the dough down, then pinch off egg-sized portions of dough and shape them into an oblong "beaver tail" shape. Cover with a damp cloth while shaping the remaining pastry.

Deep fry in at least 4 inches of oil until lightly browned and dough floats to the top. Immediately dip into cinnamon sugar or top with desired topping. Makes 15-20 pastries.

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