

The First Fruit of Spring: The Wolfberry [*Lycium pallidum* Miers]

By Tom McDonald

After a long, hungry winter, the ancient tribes of our Sonoran Desert thrilled to the sight of the first fresh fruit of the season, the bright red berries of the wolfberry. Some native tribes referred to the wolfberry as the “water fall down bush” because the rain knocked the berries to the ground.

Wolfberry is a large, dense shrub that inhabits hillsides, basins, and washes throughout Colorado, Texas, Utah, California, Arizona, and down into Mexico. Along its thorny branches are clusters of small, pale green leaves and, to many eyes, it resembles another native, the Hackberry. How can you tell the difference? Most easily by when the shrub bears fruit: wolfberry produces in the spring while the fruit of the hackberry ripens in autumn. Wolfberry is not a showy plant and, therefore, is not often used in landscaping.



A member of the nightshade family, our native wolfberry is akin to the more familiar goji berry and packs the same nutritional wallop. As you hike along the trail, these berries provide a tasty treat but, like the goji, more than a handful may cause slight indigestion, especially to the belly unaccustomed to eating native foods. Herbalists often advise against ingesting wolfberry if one is suffering from a cold or flu as it might heighten symptoms.

If you are game to try harvesting wolfberries, watch out for the thorns! Due to the tiny size of the berries, harvesting is a labor-intensive process. Once harvested, you can use the berries fresh or dry them for later use by spreading them out in a flat basket or baking sheet and allowing them to dry for several days. The dried fruit should be stored in a glass jar for later use. If you are feeling adventurous, you might try substituting wolfberries for the raspberries in your vinaigrette recipe, or toss in a handful of these

berries in lieu of raisins or currants when baking a nut bread.

In March, Smiling Dog Landscapes once again offers its Curandero Trail Walk on Wednesday, March 11th from 9:00 to 11:00 a.m. This walk is free but space is limited. To register, call 480 288 8749 or email us at info@smilingdoglandscapes.com.

In addition to the above event, Smiling Dog Landscapes is partnering with Central Arizona College to host a double-header! On Thursday March 12th, we will offer our Irrigation Class followed immediately by a Garden Walk. For more information, contact the Superstition Mountain Campus of Central Arizona College.