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Lee Davenport eats an apple picked from a tree along the John Nolen Drive bike path.

Living off the land, city-style

Many fruits, nuts, berries are edible

By Kathryn Kingsbury

The Capital Times

Perching on a high limb of an apple tree, Lee Davenport reaches for a piece of fruit.

"This is pretty good," she says, taking a bite. "They'll make nice applesauce."

Davenport stuffs a few dozen into a plastic bag before making her descent.

A cyclist whizzes by on her left, then an in-line skater. To her right, John Nolen Drive is a steady stream of cars.

This is no bucolic orchard. This is downtown Madison.

This time of year, the city's public spaces are brimming with food.

Black walnut trees cover lawns with falling nuts and crabapple limbs sag under the weight of their fruit. But relatively few Madisonians take advantage of the bounty.

Davenport, who makes a regular habit of cooking with the edibles she encounters along public sidewalks and parks, said her hobby has raised the eyebrows of some of her closest friends.

Her roommates were at first shocked when she brought home wild grapes, crabapples, pears, plums and elderberries.

"You can really eat that?" was the response.

But their consternation faded once they sampled the desserts and preserves that Davenport makes from her finds. She said two of her favorite creations are wild plum butter and a marmalade made from ground cherries, a wild relative of the tomato.

"Anything that's wild just seems to taste better," said Davenport, a former L'Etoile pastry chef who now works for the local farm group Homegrown Wisconsin. "I've always been frugal, so anything that's free is fine with me."

As a downtown apartment-dweller who doesn't have access to a garden, she finds foraging for fruit provides a way to stay in touch with the seasons.

"I'm a frustrated gardener," she said.

Janet Parker, a graduate student in environmental studies, took some wild grapes she found along the Isthmus Bike Path last year and added them to her traditional applesauce recipe for some extra zing. This fall, she has been making a lot of crabapple jelly and drying apples for winter snacks.

"People are sometimes concerned that food is going to be dirty, but in reality if

See EDIBLE, Page 2D



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Pears are abundant in a tree near Lee Davenport's home.

Know the rules of picking wild plants

By Kathryn Kingsbury

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When picking within the city limits, foragers need to be aware of what's legal and what's not.

Gathering on private property is obviously a bad idea without prior permission.

Illinois-based foraging expert Pat Armstrong, author of the Wild Plant Family Cookbook, said she usually gets a positive response from homeowners who view dropping fruit as a nuisance rather than a delicacy.

Edible plants in most public areas in Madison are fair game, as long as you don't destroy the plant in the process.

The digging of edible roots such as day lily and Solomon's seal is forbidden in city parks, for instance, because digging up the plant destroys it.

"If it's hanging over the sidewalk, it's public property," Armstrong said.

City parks and bike paths are prime picking areas for many foragers. In most areas, visitors are free to help themselves to fruits and nuts. Apples, grapes, elderberries, black walnuts, plums, mulberries and wild cherries are ripe for the picking.

The other good news for foragers is that the parks commission does not treat these shrubs with chemicals.

"The only herbicides that we use are on

athletic fields," said Russ Hefty, city conservation areas manager. "Even where we do use herbicides, we use granular products so you don't get the drift."

However, foragers should take care when picking alongside bike paths that run alongside railroad tracks. Railroad companies are in charge of maintaining their right-of-ways, and may spray herbicides in the area.

Picking any plants in conservation areas within city parks, as well as in the University of Wisconsin Arboretum and Olbrich Botanical Gardens, is forbidden. In such areas, residents may not take any plant material without a permit, which are granted in some cases for educational or research purposes. The minimum fine is \$40.

City officials say picking weeds like garlic mustard or dandelions in conservation areas can actually cause them to spread.

"We don't want people destroying the very thing we've set aside to protect," said Hefty.

"We're not the only place you can find it," said Arboretum Director Greg Armstrong. "A lot of these things are available just along roadsides."

A map of conservation areas is available on the city's Web site: www.ci.madison.wi.us/parks/homepage.htm.

Edible

■ Continued from Page 1D

you wash it carefully, you're almost always going to be much safer than if you're buying food in the grocery store, where you're almost guaranteed that it has chemicals on it," she said.

City pollution may have fewer adverse effects on edible plants than pesticides and fertilizers used on farms, Parker suggests.

She recalled sending some collard greens, grown in an inner city community garden, for testing a few years back when she worked as an environmental educator in Baltimore. The collards grown in the city had a lower level of contaminants, such as heavy metals, than did those she purchased at a supermarket, she said.

"Anyone collecting plants for consumption would need to be very well versed in identifying plants since quite a few are toxic to deadly," said Laurie Yahr of the Wild Ones, a local group that promotes the use of native plants in landscaping.

Some of Yahr's favorite wild nibbles include wild asparagus, morel mushrooms, violet blossoms, black raspberries and mulberries.

And foragers should know whether a plant is plentiful before collecting it.

"It is never acceptable to harvest from, move, or collect seeds from endangered or threatened plants," said Yahr.

"I'm growing concerned about how much more I'm seeing Echinacea products that are labeled wild-crafted," said UW-Arboretum Ranger Judy Kingsbury. Excessive use of native plants for food or medicine threatens local ecosystems, she said.

"Wild ginseng is much less common than it used to be because people are picking it to sell."

But with other plants, it would be just as well if people ate them until they disappeared.

Garlic mustard, for example, is an invasive weed transplanted to the United States from Europe. It grows quickly and chokes out slower-growing native plants. And it's a nightmare for conservationists.

Russ Hefty of the Madison Parks Division organizes regular work parties aimed at uprooting garlic mustard from conservation areas.

"Our policy is pretty much that we bag them and put them in the trash. We don't put them in the yard waste stream. We don't want it to get into the compost. We don't want to be spreading these things anymore than we already are," he said.

But local foragers say garlic mustard's zesty hotness is appropriate in stir-fries, salads and southern recipes. The seeds can be used like store-bought dry mustard.

"Just try to get the whole root when you pull it," said Kingsbury.

Other common weeds Kingsbury said can be enjoyed with abandon wherever they are unsprayed and legal to pick include plantain leaves, dandelions — the root, flower, and leaves are all edible — and lamb's quarters, which taste like spinach.

She also recommends shagbark hickory nuts, apples, wild plums, and raspberries.

"They're delicious in a sustainable way," she said.