

# Wild Grape

also known as Riverbank Grape  
or in science circles *Vitis riparia*

Charles Burchill, 2017. Originally written for the Paddle Manitoba *Ripple*.

Wild Grapes are often found along river and stream banks, but they may also be found anywhere with good soil and something to climb where seeds have been dropped (pooped) by birds. The easiest way I have found to find and pick wild grapes is from canoe. Explore river banks over the summer scoping out grape vines, then revisit those spots late in the summer or early fall. Wild grapes are quite tart, the longer you leave them on the vine the sweeter they get – but don't wait too long as the competition from birds (and other pickers) is fierce. I do need to provide a little warning - You need to be a careful when picking from a canoe as standing on a gunwale to get those clusters just out of reach can sometimes cause an upset....



The fruit of wild grapes are edible, although they can be quite tart. The fruit provides a nice nibble straight off the vine later in the summer or fall when they become a little sweeter. The stronger taste makes for very nice preserves (jelly, conserves, and pies). Apparently, they also make good raisins – occasionally even drying on the vine. Although best after exposure to frost, if you wish to make jelly without adding pectin you will need to pick the berries a little early, with about half unripe.



Grape leaves are also edible and are popular for making Mediterranean and Middle Eastern dishes. The leaves have a sour or acid taste that works well with many meat and rice dishes. Leaves should be picked when they are large enough to use, but still early in the season before they become tough.



When picking or looking for grapes don't confuse species with similar growth habit, leaves, or berries: Canada Moonseed or Virginia Creeper. Both of these species can be found growing beside or amongst grape plants. Wild grapes have simple alternate leaves with toothed margins and heart shaped bases. Grape tendrils are persistent and forked, becoming dark and brittle over time. The stems are long lived, up to 4cm round in old plants, with shredding bark. The fruits are similar in appearance to commercial grapes only much smaller. Wild grapes have large seeds compared to the fruit. To distinguish these species, see the fine writeup:



<http://www.torontomastergardeners.ca/askagardener/identifying-wild-grapes/>.

A few sources for more information (including recipes):

Edible Wild Fruits and Nuts of Canada, by Nancy J. Turner and Adam F. Szezawinski, from the National Museum of Natural Sciences (1988). This is the third in a series of books by the National Museums of Canada that provide information on edible plants, weeds, coffee substitutes, fruits, and nuts.

Laura Reeves' Guide to Useful Plants, by Laura Reeves, from Prairie Shore Botanicals (2015). Laura is a friend that collects and preserves (compared to my grazing and swallowing). Her book is a great resource along with the courses she runs on wild edibles – and other things.

Wild Berries of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, by Fiona Hamersley Chambers, and Amanda Karst, from Lone Pine Publishing (2012). This is a great quick source with lots of additional bits of information about berries across the prairies.

My uncle introduced me to his favourite grape leaf dish from his home country quite a few years ago. I remember him sending us out into the lane to get fresh grape leaves. When we returned he had set a platter with humus, Arabic bread, a fresh baguette, olive oil, and balsamic vinegar. A while later we enjoyed delightful conversation over a meal of rice in grape leaves, lamb kebab, and tabouli. The rest is ... history. I asked him to send me the recipe when I was typing up this article as it brought back fond memories.

*Pick up a bunch of leaves, trim the stem off, stack the leaves and put in boiling water for 5 mins. Remove from water gently, prepare filling as follows: using regular white rice, (the amount matters on how many leaves you have.....use about 1tablespoon rice for each large leaf) soak rice in warm water for 3-4 mins, drain water off, chop one onion for each uncooked cup of rice, add the onion to the drained rice, along with small amount of olive oil, dried mint, salt. Take a leaf and lay it out flat, place 1tbsp of rice mixture in the center (where stem was) fold in the sides and roll for bottom to top. Place all the rolled leaves in a sauce pan and cover with water about 1inch above leaves, press a saucer or plate down over leaves to hold in place a cook on a low heat for 30-40 mins. You might check one to if rice is done. When done add about 3tbsp of olive oil and 1/4 cup lemon juice. Enjoy!!!*

