

USING ACORNS

Jim Lowery, Earth Skills

GATHERING AND LEACHING ACORNS

Acorns can be picked up off the ground around October when they fall from the oaks. Valley oaks produce the biggest acorns in the Frazier Park area, but Canyon oaks also produce good acorns, and other species such as black oaks are also good. Scrub oak acorns can be used but they are smaller. Make sure you leave acorns for the animals and birds which depend upon them – deer, ground squirrels, tree squirrels, etc. (About thirty Valley Oak acorns will make a cup of processed flour.)

Avoid picking up acorns with tiny holes from larvae in them. After collecting, put acorns in single layers in shallow trays like cardboard box tops and dry them out of the sun, for example in a garage or storage room. Every couple of days check the acorns, as some worms will emerge through little holes. Discard these acorns. After a few weeks, you can then store the acorns at room temperature in a basket or in paper bags (not plastic because they can still get moldy!); I have stored them for five years or more and they are still good.

Acorns must be shelled and the red papery skin, if it adheres (as it does sometimes with black oaks) removed from the nuts. Acorns must be leached to remove the tannin. The easiest way to do this is to first pound or grind the acorn nuts into flour. You may use a blender (not a food processor like Cuisinart) to chop the nuts into flour, a cup or two at a time. Then, line a sieve with several layers of cheesecloth and put one to two cups of acorn flour into it. Prop the sieve under a slowly running faucet so that water continuously runs through the flour and all of the flour is always slightly covered in water. When the water that drips from leaching begins to become clear (twenty minutes perhaps), taste the flour for any bitterness. Warm water works a little better than cold water for leaching. The flour can then be used right away after most of the moisture drains out, or it can be frozen indefinitely (if not frozen, it can become rancid).

Recipe 1: Unleavened acorn crackers

Mix 1 cup acorn flour, 1 cup all-purpose flour 2 Tbs sugar and 1 tsp salt. Cut in 4 Tbs vegetable shortening and add enough water to make a soft dough. Knead to mix. Turn out onto a floured board, cover and allow to rest 10 minutes. Roll dough w. a floured rolling pin to 1/8 inch thickness, adding flour to prevent sticking. Prick surface of dough with a fork. Cut into 1 inch strips and then into rectangles. Sprinkle crackers with sesame seeds if desired. Bake on ungreased baking sheet at 350 degrees for 20 to 30 minutes. Makes 2 to 3 dozen crackers.

Recipe 2: Dr. John's acorn pudding

Mix 2 cups acorn flour, 2 cups of milk, ¼ cup of dark brown sugar and 1/8 tsp salt. Bring to a boil in a skillet, stirring constantly until it thickens, monitoring carefully so it doesn't burn. Add 2 tsp vanilla or maple extract near the end. Serve hot or chilled.

Recipe 3: Acorn griddle cakes

Combine 2/3 cup finely ground, leached acorn meal, 1/3 cup unbleached flour, 1 tsp baking powder and ¼ tsp salt. Mix together 1 tbsp honey, 1 beaten egg, and ¾ cup milk, then beat into the dry ingredients. Add 3 tbsp oil or melted butter. Drop batter onto hot, greased griddle. Makes 12-15 3 ½ inch pancakes.

Recipe 4: Acorn bread or muffins

[from Euell Gibbons] For Acorn Bread sift together 1 cup of Acorn Meal, 1 cup of white flour, 3 teaspoons of baking powder, 1 teaspoon of salt and 3 tablespoons of sugar. Beat 1 egg, add 1 cup of milk and 3 tablespoons of salad oil. Add this to the dry ingredients and stir just enough to moisten everything. Pour into a greased pan, and bake in a 400° oven for 30 minutes. Or you can fill greased muffin tins two-thirds full of the same batter and bake only about 20 minutes for some excellent Acorn Muffins. These breads make a fine accompaniment to wild vegetables or wild fruit jams and marmalades, and taste as if they had already been buttered.