

Of Old Dogs and Wild Blackberries by Anne Robin

Our old dog Batai and I played a new game last summer. He has always been a happy boy, and chasing a soggy tennis ball was his favorite game. Well, he was 11 last year and couldn't keep up chasing the ball for very long. I would throw it, he would bring it back a few times and then take a break. To keep up his dignity, I would pretend to take a break myself by picking the blackberries off the vine just on the other side of our fence. When he was ready, we'd start over again, he with his happy tail and me with mouth and fingers happily stained purple.

The Wild Blackberries most commonly seen in our area are the Himalaya Blackberry (*Rubus discolor* or *Rubus procerus*). While delicious, and a good food source for some wildlife, it is an invasive weed with some damaging impact on the environment. The vining habits of the blackberries smother existing plant growth, block access for livestock, people or equipment, and can hurt grazing livestock by injuring the nasal passages with their very sharp thorns. Not to mention hurting the arms and fingers of grazing humans.....

If you have ever tried to clear some blackberries off of your property, you know it's not easy. The plants can live for more than 25 years, and they have certainly set down some roots by then! They grow both from a central crown and through rhizomes, shoots that spread out underground and start new plants. They can cover a lot of ground quickly, and once established, are extremely difficult to remove. The vines can re-establish after mowing, burning, or herbicide treatment. Only after repeated tillage can they be truly removed.

In order to be sure to clear all of the potential new plants away, the rhizomes must be tilled up every time they sprout, over a period of years. Herbicides available to homeowners are ineffective on their own; professionally applied herbicides can be used but may still require repeated applications.

The best advice for the homeowner is, embrace (not literally!) the vines if they are small enough to keep pruned back to a manageable size so you and the birds can enjoy the fruit. If the vines are taking over, call in a back hoe to remove the whole thing, and then diligently roto-till whenever you see new growth.

Phil came by the Master Gardener's information table at the Sonora Farmer's Market one Saturday and bragged about his 5 gallon haul of wild blackberries. I promised not to give up his secret site..... He had questions about his jamming techniques, and a poem to share.

August

When the blackberries hang
swollen in the woods, in the brambles
nobody owns, I spend

all day among the high
branches, reaching
my ripped arms, thinking

of nothing, cramming
the black honey of summer
into my mouth; all day my body

accepts what it is. In the dark
creeks that run by there is
this thick paw of my life darting among

the black bells, the leaves; there is
this happy tongue.

Mary Oliver

This year there aren't as many berries on my little bramble patch. Not enough rain. It's also a bittersweet time for me to go back there, since our longtime companion didn't make it out into the yard for several months. Batai was 12 this year, a ripe old age for a Shiloh Shepherd. He is finally resting in one of his favorite spots in the yard, right near the berry patch. Isn't that the way it is; life gives such sweetness and then the occasional bitter fruit comes by to remind us both how strong and how tenuous we all are. Kind of like wild blackberries....

In memory of NSabiCH Batai's Inner Light of Sunstar, CGC 5/7/96 – 8/26/08



Photo courtesy of Anne Robin