

Wilderness Way Tips by Tamarack Song

How to Squirrel Nuts Away

Last autumn throughout much of the country there was a bumper crop of nuts of all kinds--walnuts, hazelnuts, hickory nuts, pecans, and so on. I've gotten more questions than ever on how to hull, dry, crack, clean, and store the bounty. Now is the traditional time to clean nuts, and I was fortunately born to a nutty family (people still say I'm "nuts"), so I'd like to pass on some clan knowledge to make the processing easier. I credit what I know to my mother, my nutcracking guru, who grew up on a tiny immigrant farm with 11 other children. They had to gather and hunt in order to feed themselves, and fortunately for me, my mother liked living that way and never gave it up. To this day she still gathers berries, greens and nuts, as well as picking up roadkills and gleaning from fields after the harvest.

Dawn wrote asking, "Is there an efficient way to crack nuts, something better than one-by-one with a hammer or stone?" My reply: "My mother has found nothing better than a hammer. Her trick is, rather than cracking and throwing them all together for sorting, to separate the meat from the shell one at a time, right when she cracks it. She finds it to be faster than the mass-production approach, with fewer shell fragments ending up in the meats."

Terra wanted to know if the nuts in the slimy mass she ended up with after processing walnuts to make clothing dye, were still edible. "Eat away!" was my reply. "I have three bushels of musty, gooey goodness waiting for me. I've already let them sit in that state until spring, and the nut meats were delicious. My mother taught me to let nuts age for a few months, which gives the meats time to firm up and shrink a bit. This makes them easier to extract from the shell, and they will keep better."

Many nuts, especially if harvested when wet or before fully mature, need to be spread out for several days to dry so they will not rot while aging. Laying them out in the sun is the best way I've found. If you do, you'll want to heed this warning from my mother: "Don't leave them unprotected, or chipmunks and squirrels will crack and clean them for you. They do it gladly, and they do an excellent job; the only trouble is they leave the shells rather than the meats."

Here are some tips for easy cracking:

- Before cracking, chill in freezer or outside--the colder, the better.
- Or cover with boiling water and drain when they stop sizzling. Nutmeats must then be dried for storage.
- Find the side of the nut that, when struck, cracks the nut easiest and cleanest.

Along with nuts being fully aged by midwinter, the quietude and slow pace of this time of year makes it perfect for nut processing. As did the Natives, you can crack and clean nuts while socializing or watching children. We usually crack nuts as we eat them, because most nuts keep best in the individual storage containers they came with.

This is the time to eat nuts, as their high fat content gives warmth and energy for outdoor activities. Isn't it beautiful the way our Earth Mother often provides what we need, right when we need it?