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WILD PLUMS-- Breath of Spring

by Wilma Wieclaw

A glimpse of misty white seen through the black trunks of elms, the dark green of cedars, the gray of sycamores, is breathtaking, not because of the heady fragrance of the delicate blossoms, but because this--a hog plum thicket--is the first sign of spring in the woodlands and sand country of Oklahoma and Arkansas.

While the woods are still brown and dead-looking, and the only greenery is the landscape of winter wheat spread out in western Oklahoma, you'll catch sight of a faint misty gleam among the thickets that line the Canadian and along I-40 as you travel west. Native wild plums--or hog plums--are a free nostalgic delight to anyone who loves nature and appreciates the largess she sometimes bestows. As the black walnuts are to the eastern part of the state, so are wild plums to the western sections and on into Texas and Kansas.

There are many varieties of plums. Some, like hog plums, are small as a cherry; others may be as large as an egg and some are egg-shaped. When the white man came to America he found many varieties of wild plums, all growing in soil and conditions suited to their variety.

Plums are grown from seed only to supply new varieties. They're used for budding and grafting. Cultivation and pruning have resulted in orchards of native sections--the beach plum of the Atlantic coast; the Chickasaw, the wild goose, so called because the first tree grew from a seed found in the crop of a wild goose. Some cultivated varieties came from Europe and are adapted to the west coast and New England. The Pacific coast grows excellent plums which are dried into prunes. The English damson is a small oval plum and the green

gage is a flavorful green plum. Burbank developed the Bartlett plum, with the flavor of the Bartlett pear.

Some people call them hog plums, believing they're not good for anything but feeding to the hogs, but others gather them knowing the possibility of the fruit in tasty jams and jellies.

Hog plums are small, hardly as big as a ping-pong ball, and composed mostly of tough skin on the outside covering the inside with pulp surrounding a seed. It's this pulp that's used for making jelly and jam with unique sweet-sour appeal.

For making jells from tame varieties directions say to "pit and chop." This you can't do, so just cover the panful of plums with water and simmer until the skins pop open, about ten minutes. Strain through a bag or colander. You can press the pulp through the holes or do as my grandmother used to do--squeeze the pulp through the fingers, discarding the seeds and skin. If you're making jam, don't strain the juice but do discard the skins and seeds. For jelly, use 5 1/2 cups of juice to 7 1/2 cups of sugar, and a box of pectin, though the pectin is not needed if you boil the syrup a little longer than the ten minutes recommended. Stir often until thick foam forms that can't be stirred down.

Daring boys who eat hog-plums may make wry faces at the sour taste, even when ripe. They'll turn up their noses at them when picked right off the tree, but not when they get a taste of plum jam or jelly made from those plums when the fruit is ripe. On breakfast pancakes, toast or waffles, or a peanut butter sandwich, or simply spread on a single slice of bread, plum jam or jelly is a treat.