

Fireweed syrup

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When it's not late summer, my fireweed patch does no eye-catching. It straddles the ditch by the roadside and looks like other weedy green places I bicycle past. But in July and August it draws my gaze to the point of distraction, and I have to get in there. It's not the flowers humming with bumblebees, although they have an earthy hypnotism that makes you want to spend all day with them. It's not the richly dark green leaves. I'm drawn in there by the unreal magenta colour of the flower plumes. I want to eat that colour.

For celebrating the northern summer, fireweed syrup will shock and delight you. But most of the recipes I'd found were skimpy on instructions for actually gathering my fireweed. Should I use the whole plant? Should I use the buds? Just the petals? What about the bugs?

I spent a lot of time in that patch. Go in and you will find that every blooming fireweed has a parade of flowers in all the stages from bud to fertilized and bursting seed pod. At the top: tiny whorls of small buds yet to mature and open. Below them: many levels of open, richly-coloured flowers, sticking further out than the buds, giving the flower head a cone-like shape. Below that: stick-like ovaries of blooms that have already been pollinated, and have dropped their petals. At the bottom: ovaries that have become seed pods, getting ready to burst open and release the tufted seeds.

Just the second group, the open flowers, go into the recipe. Each flower, which if you look at it closely is a tiny, four-cornered toy top, sits out from the main stem of the plant on its ovary, a pinkish tube that eventually grows into the seed pod. There is a whorl of four sepals—thin magenta leaves that I mistook at first for petals—and four petals. The small white stamens hang out, sometimes coated in a chalky teal pollen, and the pistil's end is curled up like the capital of an Ionic column.

I go in there with a small bucket, which, unlike a bag, stays open as I pick with the other hand. Bending each plant over the bucket, I tug off the blossoms that are open. No leaves, although if a few fall in you can pick them out later. No buds, or the main stem of the plant. But the whole blossoms are fine: ovaries, sepals, petals, stamens and pistil.

After I've worked a patch of fireweed for a half hour or so, I have enough for a batch of syrup. My eyes feel pleasantly full: they've had enough of that feast. The contrast between the green leaves and the magenta

flowers borders on alarming. As I head home the rest of the world is quite dull.

But my work is only half done. I now have a bucket of both fireweed blossoms and bugs. The bugs come with the territory because that was their habitat I was picking. In my area of northern BC there are three main bugs I find in the blossoms. They soon make themselves evident, crawling out along the sides of the bucket.

At first I called them "the green bugs," "the black bugs with the racing stripes," and "the ivory spiders." But you can't spend so much time with creatures, especially time spent trying to rescue them from death, as I'm about to do, without wanting to know their real names. They're not like people though: with bugs this kind of thing can be difficult. You can't ask them their names. Nor can you ask Google. (Although I expect some day you'll be able to upload a photograph and say "What's this?" but I think I'll be just as happy not to be around then). I searched around a bit; I tapped an entomologist for help.

They are green mirids, pirate bugs, and white crab spiders. Each is in the middle of doing his thing when I come along and rip out the flowers they live in. The green mirids are eating the plant itself. I should be able to identify best with them, since I'm in competition with them, but in fact they get the least

sympathy from me. They are juicy and green, and I just don't see myself that way. I identify more with the pirate bugs, who are predators eating the mirids, hunting along the leaves and flowers, stinging, biting, devouring. The white crab spiders are hunters as well, but they are not web-building spiders. They are snatch-and-grab predators, and they have even been known to attack a visiting bee. Life for insects is such a horror movie.

They all need to be enticed out of the bucket.

I discovered a technique whereby I slowly tip the bucket on its side, and begin to turn it to tumble the blossoms. The pirate bugs are the first to come out, racing for the edge of the bucket as soon as I tip it, as if they know they don't want to be in there. Predators are smart. A helpful finger assists them in getting out. Soon quite a few green bugs are heading for the lip too. They get a slower start, I tell myself, because they are grazers; basically microscopic cows. Not fast thinkers. The spiders, who look like little ivory crabs smaller than my littlest fingernail (and bear a striking resemblance to fireweed pistils) are shy and don't come out during the bucket-tumble phase. I know what they're thinking. They



are canny and reserve their options. Remain hidden, and something tasty may come along.

The next technique is to tip the bucket on its side and leave it outside for a while. This gives the spiders time to escape. After the bucket had been on its side for a half hour or so, I up-end it into a tray, and pick through

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Combine in a saucepan:

7.5 cups fireweed blossoms
5 cups water



and heat gently until the colour comes out of the flowers and into the water. Let it come to a gentle simmer, and the water should turn a deep red. Strain out the blossoms (which are white and spidery now), and retain the water.

In another small saucepan, combine

1.5 cups sugar
1 cup water

and heat until the sugar is dissolved. Mix with the fireweed-infused water, and add:

3 tbs lemon juice



The resulting mix should be a deep red colour.

Simmer this liquid until reduced by half. Pour into canning jars and seal. Serve over vanilla ice cream.

for the final mirids and spiders. They move a good bit, so they're easy to find.

So, good: fireweed flowers moderately cleaned of inhabitants (let's face it: no one gets them *all* out). Now for the recipe.

The first time I did this I stuffed my blossoms in the saucepan, and had to push them down into the water. They seemed to resist this, as if they knew they were made to be flowers, not ingredients. They had fabulous buoyancy. I simmered them gently and their colour fled. I shortly had white, spidery membranes floating atop red water. They had not only lost their colour, but they had lost all resemblance to flowers. They were more a mass of wet fibres, albino, almost crunchy looking. I poured it out through a sieve, eager to get the blossoms away from my liquid, which I gloated over like a mad scientist

Dissolving the sugar in the water went easily. Dissolving sugar in hot water is nothing. You can't blow it unless you simply walk away. If you stir idly it will happen of its own accord. There is no doubt about when you are done: the sugar is gone. It is a perfect task for children.

After I added the lemon juice I stood back and admired the deep red colour of the liquid. It looked good, the way jello looks good before it is even gelled. It looked rich. I tasted it. It was bitter and metallic, yet tart and sweet at the same time. Once boiled down, it was sweet and bitter at the same time.

I have found it good to serve this over vanilla ice cream. That provides the creaminess necessary to balance the dry-and-bitter syrup. My guests get a peculiar look on their faces when they try it. But they are intrigued. It grows on them as they talk about it. Sometimes they ask for more.

Fireweed syrup is only the first step in the door, however. There is a variant recipe for the hard core: fireweed sorbet.

Follow the recipe as above, but don't boil it down into syrup. Instead, chill the liquid. When cold, put in an ice cream maker and process until thickened. At this point stop the maker and fold in:

1 egg white beaten until foamy

This will turn what was a purple slush into an incredible lavender colour. Continue to freeze the mix in the ice cream maker until it seems done. (If you've previously made ice cream or sorbet you will recognize this point.) Store in freezer.

In my case, I poured it into the ice cream maker in the bathroom. (Because in our house the ice cream maker had been banished to the bathroom—on another floor—because it is too noisy. Someone who produces a review of appliances by decibel level will be my friend.) I turned it on and retreated to the next room to let it do its thing.

When I added the egg white, stirring hastily, bent over the ice cream maker, trying to get it folded in before

it froze to the sides of the container, it transformed a purple slush into an incredible lavender colour. I was aghast. I let it finish freezing, packed it in its container and hoarded it away.

Guests have not responded as well to the sorbet. It is exotic, but it does not have the sweetness we expect of a

frozen dessert. I am the only one who really likes it. To me it is quite authentically the sensation of the plant. It's synesthesia: outside, the fireweed has gone red and, seeds scattered on the wind, has been buried under falling snow; inside, the taste is still the colour of its full flowering.

