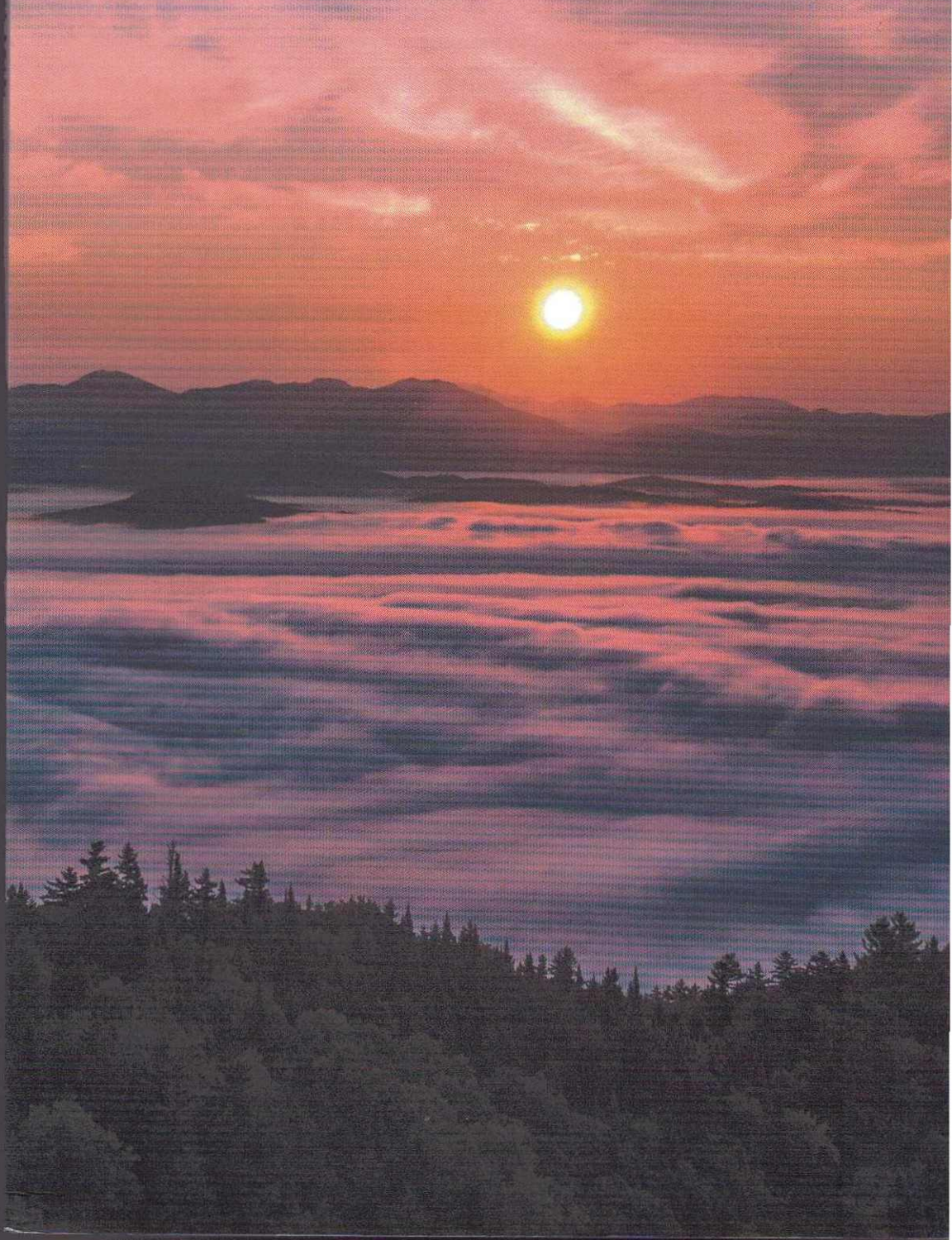


Blueline 40



How to share a blackberry patch with a black bear

- 1) Don't be afraid to make noise. For once in your life, stomp your feet. Talk to yourself, sing. Talk to the bear, preferably before seeing her. Make it clear you are willing to share the summer bounty and intend to leave the fruit just beyond your reach. Demonstrate your generosity by dropping a few berries among the robins who skitter in the fallen leaves around your feet. As you pick your way down your neighbor's grassy path, eyes peeled for berried branches, remind the bear that your reach is limited. Your wrists are already red-streaked from the thorns that attack you as your reach on tippy toe for the fruit. Given the prevalence of poison ivy, surrender the inner most territory of the patch to your competition. The bear is bigger than you and, despite her reclusive nature, she will always win in a fight. Given this disparity in size and strength, never forget: the bear makes the rules.
- 2) This is a limited engagement. From the morning in early August when the green berries first blush red until the last soft black berry plops elusively to the ground just before the leaves burst into fall brilliance, the two of you share this territory in a temporary truce. Let the bear know you appreciate the importance of wild berries to her survival, but remind her there are plenty to go around. Just as she must pack away the pounds before her winter hibernation, you are counting on your frozen harvest to sweeten the snowy months of cereal ahead.
- 3) Show some respect. Never come between a mother and her cub. Never ignore the snap of a twig in the lower field or the steady crackle of heavy footsteps approaching. Be on the alert. Bottom line: you are the visitor here and should graciously abandon your search if your host decides that this bright, sunny morning is ideal for foraging.
- 4) Don't let fear defeat you. The hemlock and pine forest surrounding the field where you stand is riddled with shadows. Chipmunks and squirrels scurry in the undergrowth filling their larders. Blue jays squawk like chalk writing on a blackboard, competing with the crows for territory. Hummingbirds buzz their wings in a frantic search for open lily blossoms. Like you, the surrounding creatures are going about their business. The raccoons and foxes will lie low until you are done. Go ahead, pick without populating the shadows with your febrile imagination. Only the resident bear should concern you.
- 5) Or perhaps the slam of your neighbor's car door. Your neighbor, unable to get clear reception of his satellite TV, cleared his wooded property of trees several years ago. Day after day, he sawed away at towering pines until they came crashing down just short of your property line. He felled maple trees, piling their branches in large mounds which he burned in smoky bonfires. His forested backyard transformed into a barren wasteland of lifeless timber, trees sprawled out like corpses. In their wake, these wild berry bushes claimed the territory. Unlike the scrawny, leggy plants hidden by ferns and diminished by the canopy on your own lot, his berry bushes grow tall and heavy with fruit, nurtured by the composting wood and unobstructed sunlight in the devastated yard. You can feel the sunshine now in the swelling ripeness of the fruit you pick. Berries that double in size from one day to the next.
- 6) Consider this harvest a consolation price, compensation for the gaping hole you in the forest, the mess you overlook while sipping iced tea on your back deck. Your neighbor has shown no interest in the berries bushes which now flourish in his backyard, bragging instead of his view of the distant Green Mountains. So, pick on the mornings you see his station wagon back out of the driveway and turn toward the highway. Although your daily collection of ripe fruit might be construed by others as loot pilfered while trespassing, consider this an act of worship, an appreciation of nature's resiliency despite the destructive onslaught of humans concerned only with their own safety and security, and, apparently, unobstructed satellite TV reception.

- 7) You and the bear live off the earth. In synch. This is how you share a blackberry patch with a black bear. As you fill your basket, lift the canes to discover hidden clusters of ripe berries. It is quite possible the bear is watching from a distance, awaiting her turn, demonstrating the same respect you have shown her. If, oblivious to her presence, you walk too close, she will probably turn tail and disappear into the forest, more afraid of you than you are of her. In all likelihood, you have nothing to worry about.
- 8) Carry a whistle, just in case.
- 9) Your neighbor won't be home for hours. Think of this as a non-violent demonstration of cooperation among predators. A restoration. A subversive reinstatement of the natural order.
- 10) When you meet your neighbor at the post office, be polite. Discuss the weather. After a storm, watch your footing. Don't sacrifice your position by falling on your face. Don't lose what you have collected with such deliberation. You don't want to look up and see a looming shadow.
- 11) A little cortisone cream on the swelling rash erupting on your wrist will stop the itching. Think of the colander in the sink, cold well water running off the ripe berries, containers ready for freezing. Imagine the sweet taste of black berries in the dead of winter. The bear asleep in her den, having survived another hunting season without incident, her belly pregnant with masticated berries.