

Farm Philosophy

By
Newton Bair

Berries are berries, and if they can be stuffed into pies, jelled into jam, or squashed into juice, we pick 'em. The Blueberries, Strawberries, Blackberries, and Raspberries are over for the season, and what's left? Elderberries.

The thicket where the elderberries grew got more jungle-like every year. Lying in the hollow, between the hill behind the barn and the high woods, it thrived on the run-off from two slopes, and kept the deep topsoil tied down with cross-stitched roots. The trouble was, the rich soil could be growing something better.

Over the years, the thicket has been a haven for groundhogs, and a hiding place for other critters that don't like to be seen when you're carrying a gun. Heifers liked to hid their new-born calf in it, just to play hard-to-get. We once found a missing sow with her brood of nine pigs, comfortably holed up in the densest part of the thicket. She knew it was only temporary, and needed little coaxing to return with her brood to the source of feed and comfort of her pen.

The hired man wasn't above slipping into the shade of the thicket for an afternoon nap, while the plow team rested. There was no flowing water, but the ground was always moist and cool. Turtles

seemed to love the place, and an occasional snapper was caught for use in turtle soup. We were personally acquainted with some exotically colored box turtles, who lent their flat bellies for carving initials and dates with a pocket knife. One had the date Mar. 1927, and the initial N.B. The carver was ten years old.

But now that the elderberries are ripe, the thicket takes on new meaning. Kids love to pick the bunches, especially when they are ripe and full, and the birds haven't found them yet.

Mama was agreeable to making a pie or two, if someone else would pick them, shuck off the stems, and deliver the clean berries to the kitchen. They were not her favorite pie filling - they took too much sugar and they stained all the utensils, including the pickers hands. But you can't be choosy this time of year.

If the Kids get too carried away and deliver more than enough for a couple of pies, there's always elderberry jelly. The color can't be matched by any other fruit, especially when it drips on the tablecloth or on Pop's sunday shirt. It's royal hue can still be spotted on the porch floor, where someone dropped a fresh jar and the lid popped off.

A few quart jars of elderberries were canned each year, in spite of

Mamas' protest that they take up more room than they're worth. They never make it through the winter though, without ending up in a pie.

The year of the Turtle also marked the end of the Elderberry patch. The harvest was good, but Mama would have no more of those purple beads that left their stain on everything. So, Papa decided to make wine.

The old wooden barrel was hidden in the barn cellar and nearly forgotten, until Uncle George, on one of his regular Sunday visits, found it while we were at Church.

He was a regular Sunday morning visitor for a while, until he got careless and left the siphon run and emptied the barrel on the barn floor. Finis. The End. No more elderberries.


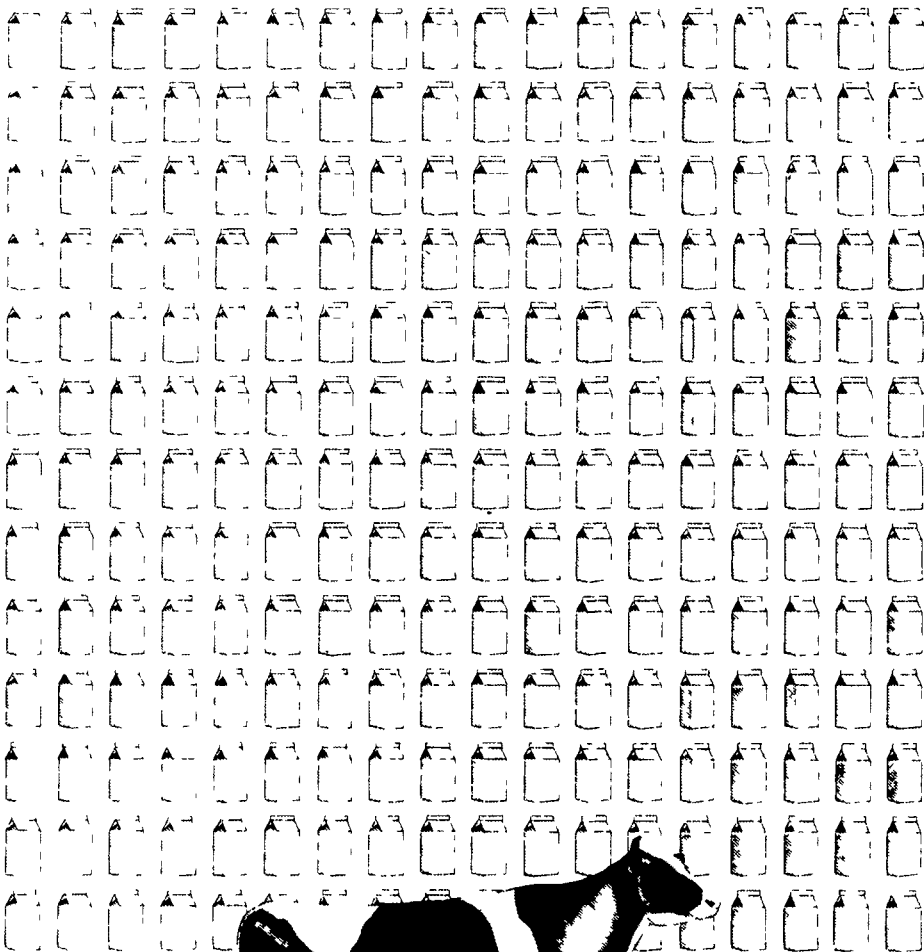
Papa decided that the thicket must go.

The next week we began the backaching labor of grubbing out the bushes, exposing soil that was too rich for such a humble crop anyway. More valuable crops were raised there over the years, but none that ever sparked the imagination and memories like the old Elderberry patch.

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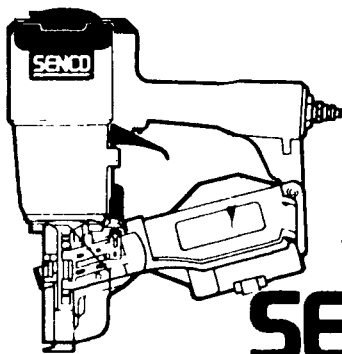
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