

## What is this? Can I eat it?

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I have always enjoyed identifying things. I was the kind of kid that drove my parents crazy. “What’s this?” may very well have been my first words! I wanted to know what plant this was, what flower that was and what kind of tree am I climbing in now? From there it went on to what bird is that, my mother was a birder so she could answer those questions easily. When I started asking about the insects, they started buying me books! My parents were fairly well versed in the local flora so Dad was able to tell me or he made something up that I believed until I learned otherwise!

Little did I know that those early interests would stay with me through grade school, high school, college and right into my career. It was either good fortune or fate that let me to a job where answering the question of “What is this?” would be such a helpful skill!

Hardly a day goes by, this time of year, that I’m not identifying something for someone. Just today I’ve had two “things” brought in to me and had three cell phone photos sent to me! But in recent years I have noticed an interesting twist in this very basic question. Once I identify the plant, I’m immediately asked the follow up question, “Can I eat it?” especially if it appears to be a fruit or a seed.

My response is almost always a “yes, but a better question is should you eat it, or is it safe to eat?” I really thought that Euell Gibbons passed on a long time ago. (For you younger readers who have never heard of him, look it up on the internet.) There seems to be a growing interest in, for lack of a better term, wild or natural food sources. As I look in bookstores or online, there are hundreds of books out there talking about wild food sources and plants that were used by Native Americans and pioneers. There are all sorts of books touting herbal remedies of all sorts.

Here is my thought on this whole topic. Just because you found it growing wild doesn’t mean it’s safe to eat. There’s a lot of plants out there that if consumed can make you very sick or even kill you. Wild carrots and wild parsnips look a lot like poison hemlock. Poison hemlock WILL kill you! We have far more poison hemlock around here than wild carrots or parsnips! Mushrooms are the real attractive trap. I feel comfortable identifying morels, but after that, I won’t even venture a guess; don’t ask!

All plants produce a seed and sometimes that seed is encased in some form of pulpy fruit that is going to look and seem edible. Some of these are very edible like the various wild plums, chokecherries, elderberries and even mulberries. But are you comfortable telling the difference between elderberries and pokeweed berries? The first are good and supposed to be very good for you, the second will make you sick! As for plants that are promoted as health or nutrition supplements, you can find yourself walking on a razor’s edge real quick. Remember rhubarb stalks are darn tasty but rhubarb leaves can kill you! Then there’s the questions of potency and what’s an adequate level. Water can kill you if you drink too much at one time. Plants grown in different places or in different years can have vastly varying levels of chemical compounds. What’s enough and what’s too much? There’s no way to tell!

Sure, Euell Gibbons became famous for saying, “Many parts are edible”. He also died at age 64! Yes, there’s a lot of plants out there that are edible, some are even quite tasty. But until you know for sure what you have, it isn’t worth risking. Ask first, eat later...maybe!

