

# SUBARCTIC FRUIT

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You enter a rocky valley and notice the scrub. Crouch down and berries come clear: pink, green, glaucous blue. The sun will move on before you do. We are born to hunt for globular things, from speckled eggs to burls and even misty gobs of beach glass.

Pulling berries from a bush is a form of wealth-getting. “We will take our berries home and can them,” says the mother in McCloskey’s *Blueberries for Sal*. Today we think of wealth as the result of clever dealings with man-made systems, but until recently everyone knew that economies grow from habitat. Prosperity hinges on territory. Hence trade. Hence war. We wear diamonds or amber to flaunt the wealth of our habitat: we flash the appearance of sparkling water and glowing fruit.

My current habitat is near Reykjavik, Iceland, at 64° N. Here, edible produce grows mainly offshore, silver and scaly: fruits de mer. On shore, no fruit bigger than a dime grows unassisted.

For fruit you need soil, but for soil you need organic matter. Rich dirt is the fruit of eons. The town where I live rests on 7,000-year-old lava, a riot of basalt folds and twists and pinnacles. Gray *racomitrium* moss lies over it like frost; grass and flowers grow in rifts. East of town the rock is still younger and utterly bare; near *Eyjafjallajökull*, it has yet to cool. Newborn rock is barren as the moon. Though rich in water, Iceland is Europe’s largest desert.

Life likes to appear. Lichen blooms on basalt in rusty splotches. Where erosion mingles clay and lichen crumbs, low plants like campion and thyme crop up. Mosses thrive in crannies and nourish each other until they can support flowers big enough for a bee to land on. Slowly heath comes into being, a sweet-smelling carpet of plants so tough you can scour pots with them.

A classic Icelandic children's book frankly explains, "We live in a cold place, where only grasses can grow. We can't digest grass, so we eat animals that can, such as sheep and cows."

But Iceland does have native trees, low and gnarled as they may be. Scrub willows crouch by mountain streams. The local birch, or "perfume bark" in Icelandic, is as sweet-smelling and as tough as heath. After the recent eruption at Eyjafjallajökull, a ranger surveying the gray devastation stood amazed as a tinkling sound, like ice cubes in glasses, began all around him: the birch buds were breaking through glassy coats of ash to leaf out.

Unaware of the fragility of volcanic soil, Norse settlers cleared the native trees and let their stock range free, nibbling saplings. Now wind skirls up loose soil. In *Collapse*, Jared Diamond calls the Icelandic environment one of the most degraded in the world. Elsewhere one flees the city in search of green; in Iceland, the greenery is mostly in town.

Transplanted from New England, I sometimes wake from dreams of hardwood trees. I pine for canopies of chattering life. In the hills of Reykjanes you are lucky to see a raven. The only mammal native to Iceland is the fox.

But not all our aesthetic joy stems from fertility. The deep slant of northern light makes whole days pink and gold. The sun smolders on snowy peaks as sharp as fish spines. Auroras, ice castles, and nacreous clouds ache with a high-lonesome beauty. Coming back from a trip home I once closed my eyes against the sight of Keflavik's barren plain, only to reopen them at a gasp of pleasure from my fellow passengers: the plane was taxiing through a lake of violet fire, a field of lupine.

In April, between sleet squalls, I walk the cobble shore and eye the tasty-looking vermilion nodes that grow on kelp roots. In May I nibble scurvy grass. Then suddenly it's June, night is vanquished, gentians riot, spirits soar; the radio declares, "Sun holiday, sun holiday, this factory is closed due to good weather." By late August, the endless light has conspired with stoncrop, bartsia, sedums, ling, bearberry, and other sisters of the moor to produce vaccinium myrtillus, bilberry, or "chief berry" in Icelandic—blueberries to any tongue.

My mother-in-law has a berry scoop that is an antique tin can with tines soldered on, painted a durable lead-green. For years she and her husband picked each fall in a certain Happy Valley they had found, in a fjord facing due north on the Arctic.

Recently four generations of our family met there. We spanned eighty years to eighteen months, false teeth to milk teeth. The oldest struggled down on her knees and the baby sat chest-deep and picked and ate with no instruction. The haze of next winter lay far out to sea. We brought our treasure home, picked over and stored it, and then hurried, sunburnt, to the hospital where my father-in-law lay stunned from a stroke.

We told him we'd been berrying, and where. His eyes grew canny and interested. "Gobs of berries," we told him. "We picked all day."

"Good," he said.