

Chapter 10:

Management and Marketing of Nontimber Forest Products

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Nontimber forest products (NTFP) include almost everything you find in the woods that is not timber. The term refers to the many products of forest origin that enhance or contribute to our lifestyles and our livelihoods. Collecting and using these products is an integral part of our common regional history and economy and commonly generates strong social and cultural connections.

NTFPs are the various berries, ferns, and mushrooms we pick to eat. They are the game that sustains our families. They are the plants gathered to use in various medicines, the roots and barks collected for basketry and crafts, and the seed cones used to regenerate forests. NTFPs are the balsam boughs and princess pine that, when worked by careful hands, become the wreaths that decorate homes during the holidays. For some people, NTFPs provide affordable outdoor recreation opportunities that strengthen social bonds and ties to the land. For others, they generate a much-needed paycheck.

This chapter introduces the richness of NTFPs. It highlights their value, as well as challenges, and presents some crucial considerations for landowners interested in reaping the rewards from the many goods in their woods. NTFPs may allow you to achieve better forest management and a more stable forest livelihood through the development of complementary forest resource management strategies.

Selected NTFPs

Identifying potential NTFPs and incorporating them into a management plan will help your woodlot achieve its full potential, through utilization of a diverse array of plant and animal resources. A conversation with your neighbor, with friends in town, or with a professional forester may help you identify potential NTFPs on your land and incorporate them into your management objectives. Before harvesting any NTFP, consult with a forester and a buyer to ensure you're following the best management practices and meeting the product standards necessary for commercialization.

Characterizing the varied uses and values of NTFPs is challenging because of the sheer diversity of interesting and useful forest plants and animals, as well as the potential for multiple uses of each resource. Additionally, NTFP use is seasonal, and often practiced on smaller scales than other forest uses such as logging. For these reasons, NTFP value is best considered cumulatively—as a suite of products harvested during a single season or throughout an annual cycle composed of seasonal activities.

Spring

- **Maple Syrup**—Sugar and black maple (*Acer saccharum and nigrum*) sap is collected in early spring when mild daytime temperatures contrast with overnight freezes. Other species suitable for tapping include silver and red maple, box elder, and paper birch. Landowners may sell unprocessed sap but more commonly they reduce and sell it as maple syrup—roughly 40 gallons of sap reduce to 1 gallon of syrup.
- **Morel Mushrooms**—Morel mushrooms (*Morchella spp.*) are a prized and high value specialty forest food. Morels are found in dry or well-drained forest soils and proliferate after burns. Caution: false morels look like morels, but are poisonous. Always consult with a mushroom expert before picking or consuming any mushrooms.
- **Pussy Willows**—Pussy willows (*Salix spp.*) are shrubs with gray-brown bark that are typically associated with wetlands or riparian areas. Willow branches are used by the floral industry when the “cat paws” are bursting.

Summer

- **Berries and Fruits**—Blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, strawberries, juneberries, chokecherries, and wild plums are harvested throughout the summer months for consumption and sale as berries or value-added products such as jams and jellies. Berry producing plants are typically associated with disturbances such as fire or harvest operations.
- **Birch Bark**—The bark of paper birch (*Betula papyifera*) is a traditional material used to construct baskets, decorations, shelters, and canoes. Bark is harvested in the late spring to early summer and, properly done, the harvesting does not harm the tree. Birch is a pioneer species associated with disturbance.
- **Cones**—Cones of various conifer tree species are collected in the summer and fall and sold, unopened, as a source of seed for tree nurseries and public management agencies. Opened cones are sold to the floral and seasonal décor businesses.



Autumn

- **Conifer Boughs**—Boughs of balsam fir, northern white-cedar, and other conifer tree species are picked after the first hard frost for use in the region's wreath industry. Both bough harvest and wreath making provide sources of income.
- **Holiday Decorations**—Club moss or ground pine (*Lycopodium spp.*) is harvested from autumn to early winter and sold for use in holiday decorations such as wreaths and runners. Plants are found most often in pine-hardwood and maple-basswood stands. Care should be taken as the timing of harvest corresponds with reproductive spore dispersal.
- **Ginseng**—Ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius, L.*) is a perennial herb found in the understory of deciduous forests; its root is an important and valuable medicinal product. Caution: Harvesting wild ginseng is regulated by law. Consult with a forester or your state Department of Natural Resources about harvest permits.
- **Dogwood**—Red-osier dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*) is a shrub with smooth, bright red bark that is used by the floral industry during the holiday season. Harvesting red-osier dogwood will not harm the plant, which responds to cutting with production of coppice sprouts.

Winter

- **Wild Game**—Game animals such as moose, deer, wild turkey, and grouse are much-appreciated components of forest ecosystems. Management interventions can improve habitat and forested areas can be used privately or commercially for recreation or hunting, provided local laws and permitting practices are observed.
- **Furs**—Fur bearing animals found in forest ecosystems, such as weasels and martens, can be trapped for their pelts. Preserved pelts can be sold to fur traders.

Non-seasonal

- **Character and Figure Wood**—The growth of character and figure wood most likely results from insect and bird injury, knots, decay, burls,

and irregular grain coloration or patterns. Examples include burls, birds-eye maple, diamond willow, and “spalted” wood. These specimens can be sliced into high-value veneers, turned on a lathe, or carved to accentuate their appearance and increase their value.

- **Small-Diameter Wood**—Sticks, twigs and vines are used as decorative material and in traditional basketry. Some tree species, including alder, aspen, birch, dogwood, ironwood, mountain maple, sumac, and willow are sought after for furniture wood. Birch and other hardwood species are also used to make specialty products such as artificial trees and picture frames. Stems for this use are typically between 2 and 10 feet and less than 3 inches in diameter.

Management and Marketing Considerations

Harvesting NTFPs simultaneously affects the health of individual plants and animals, plant and animal populations and communities, and the broader forest ecosystem. Mild effects may be caused by simply walking around in the forest. At the other end of the spectrum, management for preferred species affects stand structure and species composition. Harvest effects are a function of what is harvested as well as the timing of and technique used in the harvest.

Just as there are forest management guidelines in many states to protect water quality and other natural resource values during forestry operations, the Forest Stewardship Council has produced guidelines for NTFP management that lead to ecologically sustainable forests. The Forest Stewardship Council's generic guidelines for NTFP certification highlight issues to consider:

- Land tenure and access and use rights and responsibilities
- Forest management planning and monitoring techniques
- Forest management practices
- Environmental impacts of harvest, including biodiversity conservation

- Social and cultural impacts of management and harvest
- Community and worker relations
- Broader benefits from the forest and economic vitality
- Chain of custody for NTFPs

The potential for commercial use of NTFPs depends on:

- The seasonal nature of markets, including the timing of supply and demand
- The scale of operation that meets both quality and quantity expectations
- The informality of social and commercial marketing networks
- Internet opportunities

Finally, intensive NTFP production, or agroforestry, represents an option for landowners interested in larger scale domestication of certain forest products. The combination of forestry and agricultural techniques is common throughout the world and is gaining recognition throughout the Lake States. Agroforestry enterprises associated with woodlands have focused on:

- Decorative woody perennial crops (such as red-osier dogwood and curly willow) that easily regenerate through coppice sprouts
- Food crops such as hazelnuts, chestnuts, and berries
- Wood fiber crops for renewable energy

All of these enterprises have the potential to provide income to landowners.

Learning More

Utilizing NTFPs has the potential to enhance your livelihood and complement your lifestyle, while connecting you to the region's diverse cultures and shared history and economy. The process begins with a step as simple as a conversation with a neighbor or a local friend. Local colleges, universities, state and federal agencies, private enterprises and the Internet are all potential sources of information and support for NTFP activities and enterprises.

Suggested References

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