

## Blackberry Pickin'

It's coal oil-and-string time in Tennessee again. That – for the enlightenment of city slickers and transplanted Yankees – means blackberry-pickin' season in the South is here. Hearty souls are assaulting briar patches with vigor (of varying degrees), visions of blackberry cobbler pies and jellies dancing in their heads.



July the Fourth weekend is usually a prime time, and while the picker comes out of the weeds and briars with buckets (depending on his dedication to duty) of the fruit, he seldom comes out ahead in his contest with nature. That is true for three reasons. To get the blackberries, he must:

1. Resign himself to the pain inflicted by thorns and thistles.
2. Submit to the subsequent itching of countless red devils called chiggers.
3. Pick with one ear constantly cocked for the rattle of a snake, for no blackberry patch is complete without one.

For those reasons, folks, meet a retired blackberry picker.

Although a citizen of the Volunteer State, I never got into the berry business by choice, come to think of it. I was put out among the briars by a mother who felt that families should do things together – especially picking blackberries.

Even though the blackberry ripens in the hottest part of the summer, its harvest requires more attire than a swimsuit or Bermuda shorts. There is, in fact, a uniform for such a pursuit, donned with strict attention to a prescribed, pre-picking ritual.

It is best, of course, to wear a wide-brimmed hat to protect the face from the hottest sun you will ever experience anywhere, including the golf course, the tennis court, or the tomato garden. Overalls generally are the best clothes because they are tough. Long-sleeve shirts are a necessity – to guard the arms from scratches. Boots, which do the same things for ankles, serve an even better purpose. They provide a measure of peace of mind for the troubled at heart because of the snake in the grass.



Here's where the coal oil and string come in. The string is dipped in coal oil and then cut and tied around the picker's wrists and ankles. This ceremony is necessary, it is said, to defend against those villainous chiggers that attack the body.

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Those tiny red larvae of mites may imbed themselves anywhere on the body, but their favorite places are those that cannot be mentioned here. If you're interested, sir or ma'am, ask an old berry picker. Privately.

Whether the coal oil-and-string routine kills or shoos away chiggers, I do not know. I was never told. All I do know is that, in my case, the chiggers apparently built bridges across the coal-oil zone, because they reached their destinations anyway.

So, across the Southland this Fourth of July weekend, men and women with buckets will be in the briar patches.

But, friends, they can have at it. Here is one berry picker who's going to stay retired.

– Beecher Hunter