

The Last Berries of Summer

By Andrew Smith

Outrage! Summer is almost over!

I can't really express the deep sense of disappointment I feel when I see the first "Back to School" sales advertised in the paper, even though I don't have to go back to school anymore and autumn is maybe even the best season of all. But my boys have got to go back, and it pains me to think about it. Sure, they'll learn to become more civilized animals with each passing year, but I hope they don't forget something wild about summer. No matter how old they get, I hope they don't forget that.

Autumn is the dry wine pressed from the rich grapes of summer. I like the fall, the golden leaves, the sharpening breeze, the vivid, earthy smells, flannel shirts, splitting firewood for winter. But I don't really long for autumn after a too short summer the same way I long for summer after a too long winter.

Summer is rich, the amazing wealth of Nature. There is no green anywhere as bright and alive as the new growth of early summer. Lightning bugs shine like prayers in the night, and crickets sing praises in the hot, humid, dark. Girls wear bikinis. Thunderstorms open Heaven's rivers, and waterfalls drench the earth. Flowers pull rainbows from the sky to burst against the ground.

My bonsai take as much of it as they can get. They open themselves to the sky and drink in the sun and heat and rain. Born in the mountains, they know without knowing that it will not last long. Winter is always just over the horizon, a shivering white ghost eager to reclaim its domain. It sometimes snows here in July, just an inch that lasts a few hours, just as a friendly reminder.

So my pine trees sometimes seem to wait and wait and wait and then suddenly do a whole seasons worth of growing in just two weeks. It's almost like the 4th of July of Bonsai. Everything pushes to finish its growth while the sun is still hot. I think you could measure the needle growth with a ruler, day by day.

Then it slows down. Buds and berries begin to swell. In mid-summer the tree already plans past winter and fall for the coming spring. Meanwhile my insurance agent urges me to forget about spring and plan for fall and winter, but I'm not listening.

I don't have too many flowering bonsai here and the ones I do have are all natives. I have a very old wild plum that's in the ground, so not

technically a bonsai yet, but hopefully will become a bonsai soon. And I have some western red currants and a couple Saskatoon serviceberry. And a bearberry, or kinnikinnick. That's it.

All of these have white or pinkish/white flowers and red berries. The plum actually has small reddish plums, rather than berries. No matter.

In bonsai books the autumn fruit of a flowering tree is displayed as something as lovely, at least, as the tree in flower, or the new leaves in spring. Not only is it visually captivating, but it's an enduring symbol of the rich fertility of life and rebirth past winter again and again. So, the fruit on a flowering bonsai would be something you'd want to keep and display, or at least so I once thought.

But as we careen towards autumn I see that once again my flowering bonsai have no fruit. No plums, no currants, no bearberries, no serviceberries. The cupboard of the tree is bare and there's no fruit to be had. This crop won't yield a thimblefull of jam.

There was fruit, a few weeks ago. Green berries weighted drooping branches as they swelled and deepened into to red. OK, that's maybe a gross exaggeration, but there were berries and plenty of them.

Then the birds came. They come every year and they eat all the berries. This year I thought maybe I'd do something about that –put the trees inside for a while, or something, so I could have berries to look at. But I didn't.

This year the birds were a pair of juncos. They built two nests under some grass in an earthen bank by the greenhouse and raised several chicks during the summer. I was worried the worthless cat would get them, but she never did. She's supposed to chase squirrels but she doesn't do that either. Maybe she's vegetarian.

Anyway, the juncos and their fledglings perched on my bonsai all summer long. They got pretty used to me and would hop from tree to tree in front of me while I watered. I got attached to them. They were raising a crop too.

Then the berries started to ripen and one by one they began to disappear. The birds managed to pluck them without tearing a single leaf, so far as I could tell. I thought it was fine. I often saw them giving food to their chicks, even after the chicks could fly.

So, when winter comes and the branches are bare, my fruit-bearing bonsai will have no fruit again. The branches will be stark and empty for months to come. But maybe that's how it's really supposed to be. After all, fruit isn't made to stay on the branch. Truly, it's made to fly away.