

# 11 Berries and Ferns

Two favorite groups of plants found in Marin County are berries and ferns. Ferns are treasured for their symmetry and delicate shape. Berries provide showy flowers and colorful fruit. All of the species shown below, except the blackberry, thrive in the shady canyons and ridges of the conifer forest or along shady wet banks and creeks where they are kept moist.

## Berries

Berries grow on trees, shrubs, vines and ground covers and come in a variety of flavors. Some are edible, some slightly toxic and some downright poisonous. An important Berry Rule is,

“Never taste a berry unless you know what it is.”

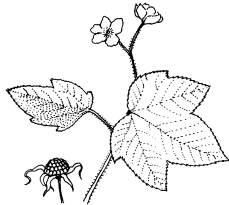
Here are five of the most common berries found in Marin County and their suitability for eating.



Red elderberry, to 15'  
White flowers - spring  
Red berries may be toxic.



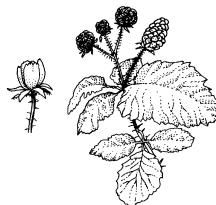
Huckleberry, to 10'  
White flowers - spring  
Blue-black berries in fall are edible.



Thimbleberry, to 8'  
White flowers - spring  
Red berries in summer are edible when soft.



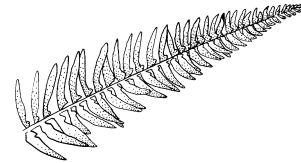
Red-flowering currant, to 10'  
Red flowers - early spring. Purple berries are barely edible.



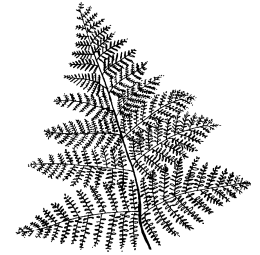
Blackberry, vine to 5'  
White flowers - spring  
Blackberries range from tart to sweet.

## Ferns

Ferns are unusual in that the main part of the fern is a leaf, called a frond. More complex ferns, like the bracken fern, are a classic example of a fractal shape in nature. Fractals maintain similarity as you zoom in on them. Look closely at a bracken fern. The side leaflets are shaped just like the whole leaf. Likewise, the shape is repeated in the subleaflets.



Sword fern, to 5'  
Very common



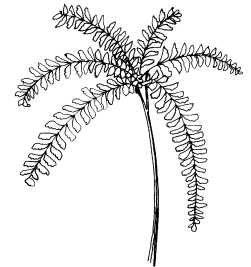
Bracken fern, to 4'  
Very common



Lady fern, to 4'  
Classic shape



Maidenhair fern, to 1'  
Shady banks



Five-finger fern, to 1'  
Moist banks

Ferns are different from most plants in that they reproduce by spores rather than flowers and seeds. The life cycle of a fern includes two separate plants: a small, rarely-seen plant called a gametophyte and the sporophyte which we call a fern.

An individual fern can produce hundreds of thousands of spores in small capsules on the underside of each leaflet. After the capsule springs open, the spores are released and, if conditions are right, grow into a gametophyte about 1/4" in size with male and female parts. If fertilization occurs, the fertilized egg develops into a new fern.