

On the Path

Fall Chores a Pleasure!

By Keith Hammer

October 8, 2009, Lakeshore Country Journal

You know it's dry out when the head falls off your axe! Indeed, that shrunken axe handle is a good barometer for how dry the woods are following our recent weeks of pleasant, sunny weather going into Fall.

As I write this article the last day of September, my axe sits in a pail of water to swell the handle tight to the head. We wait, however, for a bit of rain to put an end to late-season wildfires as we are tempted to light up our woodstoves in the morning to take the Fall chill off our homes.

Those rains are predicted and perhaps will have fallen by the time this article is published. Meanwhile, we reap the benefits of the sunny Fall weather as tomatoes ripen on the vine and the sweetest huckleberries of the season can still be found while hiking the higher elevations along the Swan Crest!

While frosty Fall weather may put an end to our gardening season, it provides the cooler days preferred for cutting and chopping firewood. True to the old saying, "he who cuts his own wood is thus warmed twice," firewood cutting can be a nasty, dusty chore in the heat of summer but a welcome workout in chilly Fall air!

It's also time to pick the remaining fruit from our trees lest it tempt bears to harvest them for us and inevitably get into other trouble near our homes. But don't forget to leave plenty of rotting stumps, fallen logs and snags in the woods for the ants and other insects that provide essential food for bears, woodpeckers and other wildlife.

Last weekend we pooled our garden produce with that of a dear friend and chopped it into a tasty batch of shared salsa. While running the risk of being called socialists, we thoroughly enjoyed this seasonal celebration of community.

Speaking of community, the biweekly Swan Range Community Music Jam Sessions and Potlucks have moved back into the Mountain Brook Community Library for the Fall, Winter and Spring. They are open to all who love good music, good food and good companionship and are held every-other Sunday from 5-9pm (with the next being October 18). The Mountain Brook Community Library is located at 2353 Foothill Road and donations toward the library room rental help restore the old Mountain Brook School building next door.

The Fall harvest of nature's bounty, both from the wild of the woods and the convenience of our gardens, always puts me in the mood of Thanksgiving some two months early! We are indeed blessed to have opportunities to partake of this bounty and are obliged to appreciate them. We are well advised to sustain this Earth and the skills necessary to fully enjoy its benefits.

As Greg Brown sings of his grandma and her root cellar:

Oh, she's got magic in her, you know what I mean
She puts the sun and the rain in with her beans
What with the snow and the economy and everything
I think I'll just stay down here and eat until spring

Fall is here and we can take great joy in the many chores that help us prepare for winter and its promise of a slower pace of life.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



Still life with axe and pickles. Keith Hammer photo.