

Crowberry, Blackberry — Augyaq, arauryaq

AUGYAT LLIIITAAKAIT UQUMEN. – THEY ALWAYS PUT CROWBERRIES IN OIL.

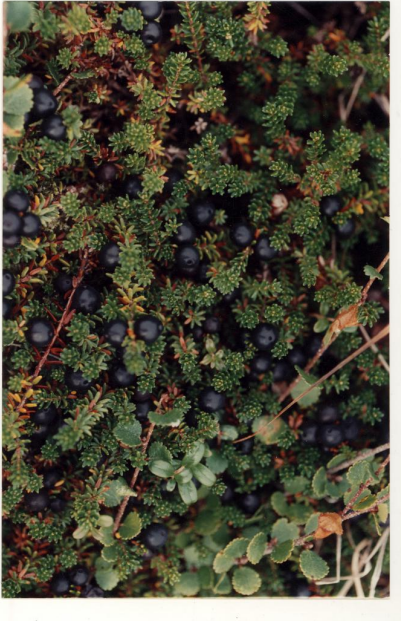


Photo: Crowberries near Akhiok. Photograph by Pricilla Russel, KANA Collection, AM4:153.

The crowberry, or blackberry, is a low-growing, evergreen shrub found throughout the Kodiak Archipelago. This plant thrives in a variety of habitats, from bogs to spruce forests. In the spring it blooms with small lavender flowers. In August, it produces round, shiny, blackberries.

Although filled with seeds, crowberries are a local favorite. People harvest them in large quantities, comparable to those of blueberries, cranberries, and salmonberries. Crowberries can be picked into the fall. However, harvesters report that rain makes the berries soft, watery, and flavorless. If you like a firmer berry, pick this fruit when it first appears.

In the past people stored crowberries in containers filled with seal oil. Today, some people use cooking oil for this purpose. Crowberries can also be preserved in cool water or kept in the freezer.

Crowberry plants were once used as a fumigant. At times, visitors to Alutiiq communities were asked to stand in or walk through the smoke of burning crowberry plants, to destroy diseases and ward off evil spirits. Similarly, people cleansed their homes with crowberry smoke. The plant was burned indoors to prevent and cure illness, drive insects out of the attic in springtime, and cleanse a home after the death of a family member.