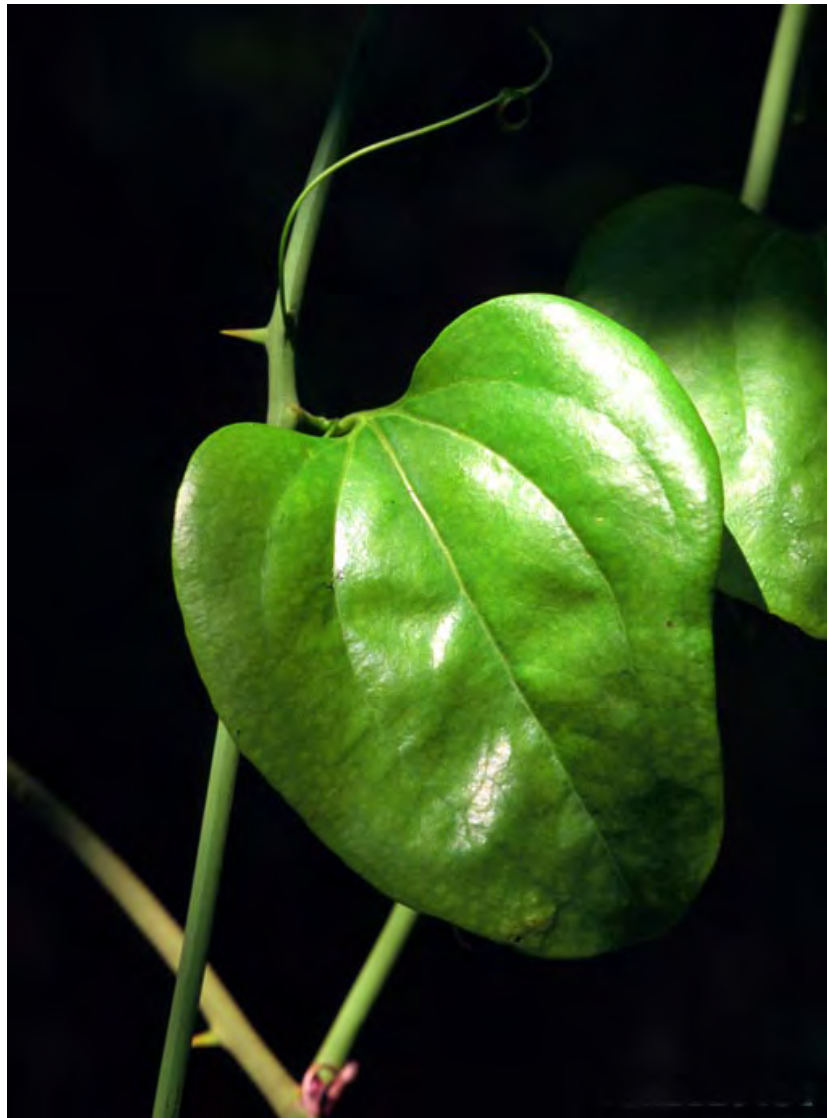


## **Thicket of Thorns**

*As with all of nature, greenbriers have an important niche. Being aware of the purposes they serve will make encounters on your hikes and woods work less bothersome.*



By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

I've had a history of entanglements with our topic plant. They have been painful, bruising, and have drawn blood. Unfortunately, they have evoked a list of expletives too long and indecent to place in a family publication.

When we first moved to our property by the river I spent many hours tugging this adversary out of the trees and away from our intended forest clearings, and my hands were bloodied by its thorny vines. Its common name is round-leafed cat brier or *smilax rotundifolia*. There are a number of species in New Jersey but I believe my entanglements have primarily been with *rotundifolia*. It has many names: common greenbrier, biscuit-leaves, and green brier.

Many of these names are also linked to other members of the smilacaceae family – cat brier (*smilax bona-nox*), bristly greenbrier, *smilax tamnoides*, and greenbrier (*smilax glauca*). All are vines, all have thorns, and all are not fun to encounter. It is the unnavigable aspect that makes them so special in the animal world, yet dreaded by people.

Trying to rid the property of it proved impossible. It is a perennial with a long-reaching root system that allows it to pop up distances from the main thicket. I happily leave river borders covered in a thicket of

greenbrier for which our rabbits are most grateful, and in which our hunting dogs are continually left foiled. In some areas of our yard it acts to keep our dogs from doing a river's edge end-run around our fencing.

In fact European colonists used many species of thorny plants as natural barriers. One of the most famous of these is the invasive multiflora rose, a nasty impenetrable thorny shrub. Conversely the greenbriers are native.

Br'er Rabbit may be many readers' first acquaintance with briers. Based originally on African folktales in which animals speak, trickster Br'er Rabbit (Brother Rabbit) encounters a fox and wolf who are convinced by Br'er to toss him into a thicket from which he quickly escapes, leaving his would-be assailants in a lurch, having missed a chance for rabbit stew.

This fable, like many, is parable based on fact. The truth is that brier patches save many animals from potential predators. Small birds commonly fly into thickets, with their tiny wing spans navigating the tight web of thorny vines that larger raptor species are unable to penetrate. Rabbits and other small mammals avoid aerial predators and larger mammals by running the tunnels made by the brier's closely knit web. Though

they may be a nemesis to people when they wander off the trail, they are a salvation to many forest creatures, offering a barbed wire of resistance that protects them from harm.



*The berries of catbrier are a favorite of birds. The seeds within the fruit are often dispersed by birds, making them farmers of their next meal. Photo: Author.*

The benefits of the smilax don't end there. They have berries that mature mid-autumn

and persist into winter. These provide sustenance to a vast number of bird species including cardinal, ruffed grouse, red-bellied woodpecker, white-throated sparrow, crow, catbird, brown thrasher, and bluebird. Young foliage is eaten by white-tailed deer and by lagomorphs such as rabbits, hare, and pika.

Typically I can tell that an area is frequented by deer simply by seeing lots of cat brier at heights that do not exceed a foot.

People can enjoy the new-growth leaves and stems of this perennial as well. I've eaten them as fresh greens and found them tasty. The rootstock is also edible, but I've not tried it. I'd always been taught that the berries were inedible for humans but that is inaccurate. In fact according to well-known North Carolinian Helen Yoest, Director of Bee Better Naturally, "The berries are delicious raw or cooked into a jam or jelly." Further she states, "Roots can be ground and dried and used like flour. Early Native Americans used the roots as a starch source. The roots can also be used like any root vegetable – boiled, stewed, or roasted."



One discouraging aspect to the berry is that it is small and commonly contains two seeds, so I suppose a jam would be best. Secondly berries mean navigating, at the very least, at the edge of the brambles and getting poked by thorns. Myself, I'd prefer to see the birds enjoy them. But should an apocalypse close down the supermarket, I now know that these can be a source of sustenance.

Ethnobotany uses are documented for greenbriers. There are some species differences but most show the Cherokee using its analgesic properties by making brier scratches in localized painful areas as in rheumatism. Parched and powdered leaves



were used to treat scalds. For dermatological problems powdered and beaten leaves were placed on boils and galled places (sores caused by chronic irritation). Decoctions were used in dispelling afterbirth. Powdered root was applied as a deodorant. These are but a few examples of Native American medicinal practices.

The greenbriers have heart shaped leaves placed alternately along the vine/shrub. *Smilax rotundifolia's* stems can climb to 32 feet and fasten to bark and limbs with tendrils. Its greenish-yellow flowers appear in late May – early June, with male and female clusters being found on the same plant. There are six petals, and the stems are generally pencil-thick or thinner.

Greenbriers are extremely adaptable, preferring sandy soils, either dry or moist, and acidic to slightly acidic (a pH of 5.0-6.0) conditions. They grow in sun to partial shade.

They are one of a number of species that I have found bothersome at first, but that with time and understanding I've come to appreciate. I suspect it will be hard to remind myself of that the next time I'm stuck in a thicket of briers, but there's always room for growth. And grow they will.

**Human Connections - Greenbriers**  
**The Missouri**  
**Department of Conservation**



*Smilax rotundifolia* is found in states bordering the Mississippi, eastward to the Atlantic Ocean, and northward into Ontario, Canada. Photo: Vitaly Charny, iNaturalist.

Wild edibles enthusiasts give high ratings to the various greenbriers. The fat, tender, fleshy stems of new growth can be snapped off and served as an asparagus-like vegetable served raw, cooked, or in a casserole. Here are some general suggestions:

- You can simply boil or blanch them and serve them with butter.
- You can use them in omelets or stir-fries.



- One casserole idea is to preboil or steam the brier tips and layer them with sliced hard-cooked eggs in a greased casserole dish, starting and ending with the greenbrier. Top with a white sauce, or a white sauce with cheese, and bake.
- Greenbrier shoots can be included in a pickle crock, along with a variety of other wild greens such as grape leaves, cattail shoots, day lily shoots and unopened flower buds, redbud pods, purslane stems, and so on.

The roots of this and other prickly-stemmed greenbriers can be used to make a drink similar to root beer, and a sweet jelly can also be made from boiling the roots and adding sugar.

Green Box Source: Missouri Department of Conservation, Online field guide, Round-Leafed Catbrier

### **Sources**

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