



Attack of the Wild Blackberries

It could have been a cheap 1950s horror movie directed by Ed Wood. In forested parts of the Pacific Northwest, spring is the season when blackberry vines begin to grow—and grow and grow and grow. The thick, thorny canes of the non-native Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus procerus*) can grow over 25 feet in a season. It will engulf fields and forests and devour your house if not controlled. It is officially regarded as “invasive” and a “noxious weed.”

But I like it. It yields huge, plump, tangy berries and a lot of them. That’s presumably why the great American botanist Luther Burbank introduced it to the area in 1885 for cultivation. Were he still alive today, he might regret his action after seeing how the Himalayan blackberry crowds out native vegetation, takes over stream channels and interferes with wildlife. As I heard a botanist comment, invasive plants are invasive for a simple reason: They are way stronger than others. There are more benign native blackberries, (*Rubus ursinus*), as well as many other varieties suitable for cultivation. But I opt for the Himalayans and maintain two patches on my property. And I control them, cutting them back often and limiting them to parts of my yard.

Come August, I begin harvesting, gradually accumulating several quarts in my freezer and turning them over to my culinarily skilled daughter who transforms them into jam and pie. Berry picking is one of those absorbing activities where you can forget everything else for a while. It’s a discipline. You must discern which fruits are ripe and ready to harvest. Sometimes they’re just out of sight, so you must probe through the thick foliage and thorny stalks to discover them. In the process you will get bloody scratches (thorns can be over a half-inch long), spider bites and yellow jacket stings. You may fall face down in the thicket and sustain lacerations. But it’s a good pain.

Here’s the thing: To harvest these berries, I must focus on the fruit. If I focus on the thorns, stings and bites, I may just decide to buy berries at the store—and where’s the fun in that? Like so many issues in life, thorniness can keep us from reaping fruit. In what ways, you ask? Here are a few:

Human relationships. Thorny, complex, layered issues are nearly impossible to navigate, tempting you to avoid relationships or community. Much easier to stay home in your living room, savoring your personal freedom and watching *Seinfeld* reruns.

The arts. Sure, you would love to do something artistic or musical. But after years of study, expense and mind-numbing practice, expect polite applause with a good deal of dismissiveness.

Travel. Yeah, it can be mind-expanding. But with crowded airports, lost luggage, cancelled flights, language barriers, confusion, food poisoning, jet lag, expense—why bother?

Fitness. Want to feel and look great? Get set for decades of painful training, ascetic diets/regimens (and the end is the same for us all, fit or not).

Business and professions. Eons of education and training, thorny risks, long hours of exhausting work followed by failure.

Children. Years of 24-hour caregiving, sacrifice, angst and grief—ending in flippant ungratefulness.

This is silly, because every one of these categories offers unfathomable rewards/fruit despite the associated struggles. But I’ve saved the best for last.

Issues of faith and doctrine. So—you want to sort out existential matters? Thorny is a gross understatement. You may have to abandon cherished beliefs—or even repent! You might get shunned. Better just to close your mind. Cracking it open even a little means nothing but trouble!

Here’s the key: In all of the above—**Jesus is the fruit.** Although you cannot (and *should* not) avoid grappling with thorny, painful issues, the person of Jesus puts it all in perspective and context.

Jesus gives notice that whoever lives a life of faith in him will bear some kind of cross (Matthew 16:24), and also that in the world we will have trouble (John 16:33).

But he also says he has already conquered the world. It’s not like we have to go through these thorny things to find him. It’s that he’s always there *despite* these things, and, like my wild blackberries, he is the nourishment that sustains us. □

—Monte Wolverton