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Dried Fruit for All Seasons

Virginia and Dutch's house sat back from the ridge road, on the edge of NimsheW Ridge, in the foothills of the Sierra east of the Sacramento Valley. Their back yard, nestled into a forest of ponderosa pine trees and manzanita brush, supported four apple trees, three plum trees, and three peach trees.

Virginia and Dutch went to southern California for most of the year, and I moved into their house and took care of their place while they were gone.

I reroofed a neighbor's house, helped build the foundation and walls for a new house up the ridge road, helped new neighbors clean an accumulation of weeds, brush, and trash from the yard of a house they'd just bought, and I did other gardening and odd job work where and when the work was available.

I was glad to work, and I was grateful for earnings that paid for my needs, but my passion and time-passing enterprise that summer and fall became drying fruit in hot mountain sunshine.

The fruit of the small orchard in the back yard ripened. I ate fresh fruit, and I dried fruit. Dutch had several wooden frames with nylon screen, for drying fruit. I used those, and I built more racks from materials that would have gone to the dump from the places I worked and from new nylon screen.

I sat in hot summer sunshine, cut fruit, and placed the pieces on an ever larger number of racks. I turned pieces of fruit and gathered fruit that had dried enough into plastic bags.

Neighbors down the ridge road offered me the use of their sulfuring shed, and I experimented with that. I ignited sulfur and closed the shed tightly so the

smoke from the smoldering sulfur settled on the fruit and allowed me to keep the pieces of fruit larger and moister without spoiling them. I could see the advantages of the sulfuring process, but I didn't think anything should be added to the fruit if I could avoid it.

I liked the flavor of the fruit with nothing on it better in any case, a very intense concentration of the flavor and sweetness of fresh fruit. I returned to slicing the fruit thinner and drying more of the moisture from it.

When I traveled down to the abundant Sacramento Valley, I brought fruit home with me. Friends coming up to visit learned a few pounds of ripe fruit were an appropriate ticket in the door to the original dinners I offered then, that always included fresh fruit and fruit cooked into everything imaginable.

Racks of drying fruit on saw horses, on boards or branches placed on the ground to keep a small distance from the dirt, filled the back yard, the driveway, occupied the roof and the roof of the garage and shop.

Locally grown, ripe fruit ended its season. Winter rains poured down on NimsheW Ridge. I had several hundred pounds of dried plums, apricots, peaches, nectarines, apples, pears, and a few pounds of wild berries I had harvested myself from the mountain's wild bounty.

Visitors discovered whole grain pancakes with dried fruit chopped into small pieces and stirred into the mix and various kinds of stews with dried fruit stirred in toward the last, when the pieces would soften some but retain their integrity.

Partakers of Remmerde's famous stir fry bit down on pieces of dried fruit and expressed surprise, then approval. Rice dishes showed colors of dried fruit cut into small pieces and stirred in for the last few minutes of cooking.

I gave family and friends packages of dried fruit for Christmas. People who had entered the front door

that summer and fall with, "Hope you got room on your drying racks. We brought peaches and berries from that last stand just before you start up the mountain," received the biggest packages. I hadn't forgotten who understood how serious I was about my fruit-drying project that provided fruit for several of us well into the next spring.

When warm spring sunshine returned to the mountain, I still had a few pounds of various dried fruit. The fruit trees in the back yard put on new, green leaves, then blossoms that dropped their petals and showed the tiny forms of fruit just beginning to grow as I ate the last of my dried fruit beneath their warm, growing branches.