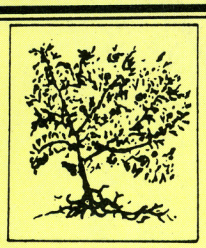
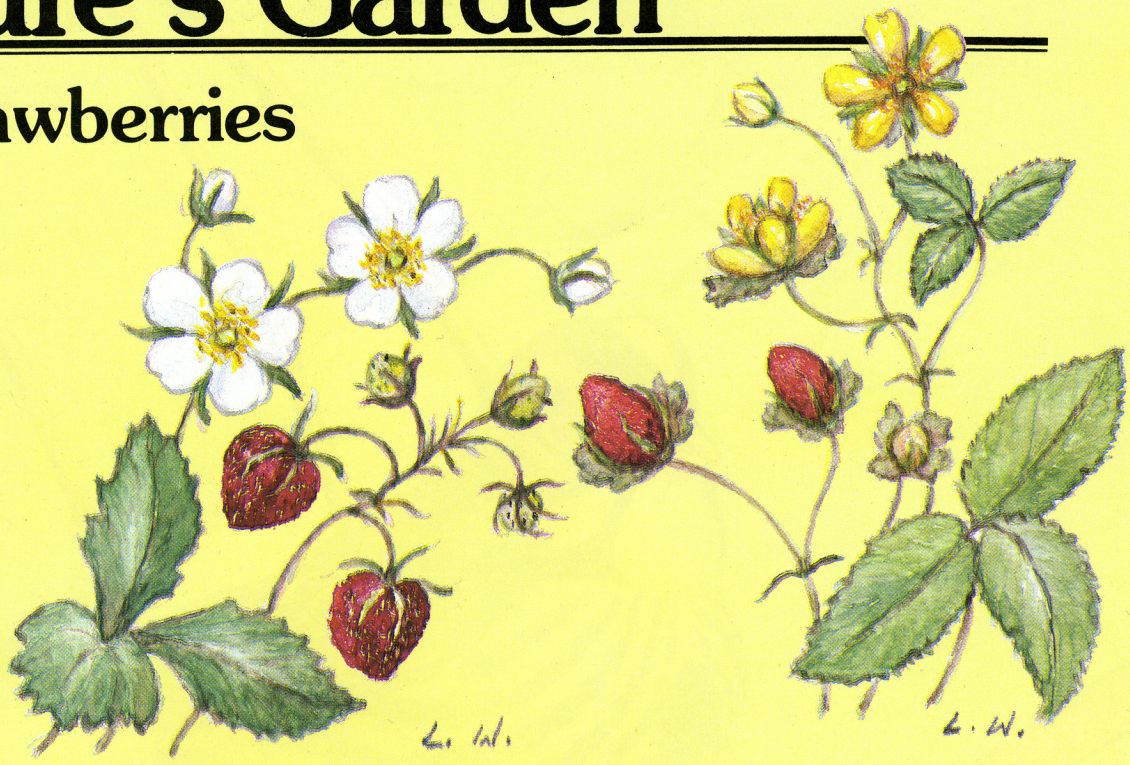
In Nature's Garden



Strawberries



Lucile Walton

by Elizabeth Murray

I occasionally receive calls from the Poison Control Center in Charlottesville, asking for information about a wild plant which someone, often a child, has eaten. I am always glad to help if I can, and equally ready to be honest if I cannot, which sometimes happens. When I first started, each situation seemed unique, but over the years I have discovered that some questions will recur time after time with astonishing regularity. One of the commonest queries in the spring, and luckily one of the easiest to answer, is whether any harm is done to a person who eats snake strawberries, mistaking them for wild ones.

It is a little difficult to see why this should be such a common mistake. Snake strawberries, also known as mock, or Indian strawberries, are neither distasteful nor poisonous, so the reply to the Poison Control center can be quickly and reassuringly given. But by no stretch of the imagination (or taste buds!) can they be considered palatable, whereas real wild strawberries are one of the tastiest fruits in the whole world, wild or cultivated.

Both plants are in the rose family, Rosaceae, but belong to different genera. Both plants have toothed, three-part leaves, and from the leaves alone it *is* perhaps hard to tell them apart. However, the snake strawberry, *Duchesnea indica,* has yellow flowers, while those of the true wild strawberry, *Fragaria virginiana,* are white. Both flowers have five free petals, as is characteristic of the rose family, but in *Fragaria* the petals are slightly overlapping so that the small leafy bracts underneath are not very conspicuous, whereas in *Duchesnea* there are five large-toothed bracts clearly visible between the petals when the flower is viewed from the upper side. Both species have large red fruits formed by enlarged fleshy receptacles with dry achenes scattered over and partly embedded in the surface. But the flesh of *Duchesnea* is pulpy and tasteless while that of *Fragaria* is juicy and delicious.

It is not quite fair that *Duchesnea* should be commoner than *Fragaria.* Snake strawberries are very prevalent invaders of lawns and other grassy places. Their ecological demands are relatively unspecific and modest and they do well in waste ground and a variety of other habitats, from Connecticut and New York south to Florida and west to Oklahoma and Iowa. *Fragaria* is found much more typically in large patches in fields, although it also grows in open woods and along the borders of denser woods. It extends further north than *Duchesnea* although not quite as far south, and there are varieties in the west which differ only slightly from the one we have here.

Snake strawberries have an extremely long blooming season. Both flowers and fruit can be found on the plants from very early in the spring practically up to the first frost of the fall. On the other hand, *Fragaria* has rather a short season. Flowers bloom in late March and April and the fruit can be gathered in May and early June. Patches of wild strawberries differ greatly in the size and amount of their fruit, but a good patch which produces plentiful, large fruit will tend to do so year after year. We have one patch in the pasture which is consistently excellent, and we return there early every summer for the crop. The berries make wonderful preserves if you can pick enough — if you only get a few, save them to eat with cream or ice cream, or just raw as they are. They can be frozen whole without any sugar to be brought out as "February treats" when they are *really* appreciated!

The one further insult which *Duchesnea indica* could add to its list of detractions, which already contains the lack of edibility, the excessively long flowering season and the rapid proliferation in lawns, is the fact that it is an introduced species, being naturalized from Asia, whereas *Fragaria virginiana,* our own tasty wild strawberry, is indeed our own, being a native North American species. □