



11 Reasons You Should Go Out Foraging For Juniper Berries

October 4, 2016 by [Sierra Bright](#)

The flavorful berries of junipers are associated with gin, but they have a host of other medicinal and culinary uses. Junipers are conifers, which means they bear cones, rather than berries. So, botanically speaking, juniper berries are not berries, but small female cones with tiny scales that have become fused and fleshy. There are over 50 species of

junipers, and all of them bear berries, mostly bluish black with a powdery bloom on them, but some have reddish-orange berries.

You can quickly source dried juniper berries, but they are no match for freshly gathered berries. Look out for accessible juniper trees to get your seasonal supply of berries. Some have needle-like leaves while others have scale leaves that are flush with the stems. Since junipers are mostly dioecious, you need to find female trees and bushes. It's not hard, though. Since the berries usually take a year or more to mature, the female plants would otherwise have berries at some stage of development throughout the year.

Juniper berries have subtle differences in flavor at different stages of growth. The green berries have a distinctly piney flavor, but they acquire a lemony hint as they mature. The green berries of the common juniper (*Juniperus communis*) are used for gin flavoring, but many other species such as *J. drupacea*, *J. deppeana*, *J. oxycedrus* and *J. California*, also produce flavorful berries. Eastern red cedar is also a juniper species (*J. virginiana*), but its berries are not as pungent as those of *J. communis*.

Caution: Some species of junipers contain a [toxic](#) resin, so it's IMPORTANT to learn which ones are okay to consume and use. A simple test is biting into a tiny part of a ripe berry. Apart from the flavor, it can be nearly tasteless or mealy, or may be juicy and slightly sweet. If it tastes bitter, spit it out immediately; you don't want to take a risk with it.

Here are some things you can do with these berries:

1. Use as a digestive aid Juniper berries can improve digestion, just as many other culinary spices do. They increase glandular function, especially the secretion of bile and digestive juices. You can make a tincture or tea from fresh berries or dried ones.

The tea is made by steeping the berries in boiling water for 15-20 minutes. Crush the berries slightly just before adding them to the water. This helps release the bioactive compounds as well as the flavor.

2. Eliminate gas and bloating Stomach pain and discomfort due to gas accumulation is a common complaint, especially after heavy meals. Gas shouldn't bother you if you have some juniper syrup handy. Have a tablespoon of the syrup after a heavy meal or whenever you feel bloated.

To make the syrup, first, prepare an infusion of juniper berries. Crush 1 oz. berries and add to one cup hot boiled water in a mason jar. Screw the lid on and keep in a warm, dark place for a week, giving the bottle a good shake every day. After a week, mix in 1 cup sugar until it dissolves completely. Strain it into a saucepan and bring to a boil. Pour into a glass jar and store in the refrigerator.

3. **Reduce inflammation** Juniper berries are [anti-inflammatory](#). It is particularly useful in reducing arthritic pain and swelling. Chronic, generalized inflammation is one of the leading causes of many diseases such as diabetes, atherosclerosis, IBS, etc. Taking a daily dose of 10 drops of juniper tincture once or twice a day may help bring down inflammation and promote good health in general.

To make the tincture, steep crushed juniper berries in alcohol. Try to obtain good quality alcohol, such as Everclear, or use 80-proof vodka or brandy. Use ¼ oz. berries to a cup of alcohol in a glass jar. Keep in a dark place for 4-6 weeks, shaking it once or twice a day. Filter out the clear liquid and store in small bottles.

4. **Reduce water retention** Water retention in the body makes you feel heavy and lethargic, besides giving you puffy eyes and face. Juniper berries can help reduce water retention by prompting the kidneys to work harder to flush out excess water. This action may also help bring down hypertension. Use a tincture or herbal tea made with juniper berries once or twice a day.

5. **Eliminate kidney and gallbladder stones** Juniper berries have excellent diuretic action, which helps increase the quantity of urine produced. On the one hand, greater dilution of urine flushes out toxins and mineral salts and prevents the formation of [kidney stones](#). On the other, the extra urine production facilitates the removal of existing stones. Increased bile production and drainage have a similar effect on gall bladder stones.

6. **Treat urinary tract infections** The antibacterial property of juniper berries combined with the diuretic effect makes it excellent for combating urinary tract infections. The recurring nature of UTI usually make repetitive courses of antibiotics necessary, but this herbal treatment offers an alternative.

7. **Relieve congestion** [Chest congestion](#) due to a cold can be treated with juniper berries. A warm tea made from fresh green berries or 5-10 drops of a tincture in a glass of warm water can be used at bedtime to relieve congestion. It is good for asthmatics also. If you want to avoid alcohol use in children, the juniper berries can be infused in high-quality glycerin.

8. **Use as antiseptic** Juniper berry tincture can be used as an antiseptic solution to prevent infections setting in cuts and wounds. Wash the wound with diluted tincture or dab it on. It can be used as an antiseptic face wash to reduce acne inflammation and prevent infections too.

9. **Flavor meat dishes** Juniper berries impart a peppery taste and flavor to dishes, which goes very well with meat preparations. In fact, dried berries were commonly used in place of black pepper when the latter was very expensive. Ripe berries are used in cooking and flavoring because they don't have much of the turpentine-like taste of the green berries.

10. **Use in pickles and soups** The peppery flavor of juniper berries goes very well with pickled vegetables and soups. It is, in fact, a popular ingredient of sauerkraut. You can either use fresh berries or dried ones, but crushing them with a pestle or mortar helps release the flavors. Since dry berries have a milder flavor, you need to use more.

11. **Make a refreshing drink** A fermented Bosnian drink called Smerka can be made from juniper berries and plain water. Add 1 cup berries to 2 quarts of water and allow to ferment for a week or more. The drink is ready when all the berries sink to the bottom. Strain the liquid and drink it lightly sweetened with raw honey if you like.

Bonus: Of course juniper berries are most famous for making gin. Check out this [recipe](#) over at [SeriousEats.com](#) to find out how to do that.

Caution: Juniper berries should be used in moderation since the active compounds in them stimulate the kidneys. They should be avoided during pregnancy as they may cause strong uterine contractions.