

Beyond Berries

Getting to Know Wild Edible Plants

by Phillip Meeks

Most who spend time in the woods have helped themselves to a handful of wild berries in the heat of summer or gathered black walnuts in the fall. These wild foods are counted among life's simple pleasures—a reward from the natural world.



The tendrils and tender young tips of greenbrier can be eaten raw.

Our ancestors were fond of these wild foods, too, as well as a long list of additional ones that provided sustenance before supermarkets and coffee shops. Like much woodlore, the knowledge to identify and utilize wild foods has essentially disappeared from society. However, the same plants are still out there, and with a good guidebook in one's backpack, learning to appreciate wild edible plants can become a lifelong pursuit.

The first exposure that many have to wild edible plants is within a wilderness survival framework, through Scouts or other youth organizations. The ability to feed oneself and loved ones in a survival situation is valid, but there are other reasons to learn the basics of which wild plants can be eaten.

Adding some basic wild plants to a person's culinary repertoire can be an excellent way to access unique flavors and textures. Given the diversity of the sites where these plants thrive, it's feasible that the plants could contain micronutrients that aren't as common in agricultural soils and home vegetable gardens. Embracing self-education of wild edible plants can add a new dimension to your hiking, camping, and hunting endeavors. Like wildflower-viewing and photography, it helps one appreciate the small things along the path and not just the waterfall or overlook that's at the end of the trail.

As with any new food, it's wise to start in small steps. Just because it's nutritious doesn't mean one's gastrointestinal system will accept it right away. Sample new plants with a degree of caution. There are a number of ways to classify wild edible plants. One way is in terms of those that can provide meaningful calories versus those that are sparser.

Big Nutrition

When it comes to wild edibles found in abundance that provide a lot of nutrition, few plants compare to white oaks and cattails. Acorns from those trees in the white oak group — including white oak (*Quercus alba*), chestnut oak (*Q. prinus*),



Stinging nettle.

and others—contain less tannins than their red oak counterparts. White oak acorns can be gathered, shelled, and added to multiple changes of boiling water until the resulting water remains clear, thus signaling that most of the tannins have been removed. Once this is complete, the acorn meats can be roasted and salted like nuts or ground into flour. Legends tell of competing native tribes battling over specific white oak trees, and that makes sense when one considers that a pound of acorns can contain 2,000 calories.

While acorn gathering is a seasonal activity, another plant that's often ranked the king of wild foods is cattail (*Typha latifolia*), which can yield edible portions all year long. The young shoots of cattails can be peeled and eaten raw in the spring, and the green flower spikes can be boiled and buttered like corn later on. The starch harvested from the rootstocks in winter, as well as the summer pollen, can be used to make flour.

Wild fruits and nuts, of course, can provide major nutritional rewards. Blackberries, raspberries, blueberries, wineberries, mulberries, pawpaws, or walnuts can provide pounds of food during season. A general rule with hickories is that the species with nuts encased in large, segmented hulls tend to be more palatable than the others. Shagbark (*Carya ovata*) and mockernut (*C. tomentosa*) are examples of the more edible hickory species. Even some invasives can yield a lot of usable fruits. Autumn olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*), for instance, will produce gallons of small, tart, orange-red berries that hang on for weeks and are high in lycopene and vitamin C.

Greens

Woodland owners may be aware of sizable patches of wild greens on their property. Generally, these should be harvested as early in the spring as possible, before they become tough and bitter. Stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) and jewelweed (*Impatiens pallida*) are two great examples, and both need to be cooked thoroughly. The barbs on stinging nettle that can cause skin irritation to anyone unfortunate enough to hike through them in shorts will dissolve in hot water. Jewelweed should be boiled in two changes of water.

Pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) has traditionally been a revered wild green and is still used by quite a few families but be aware that this plant does contain a toxin. Exercise caution if eating pokeweed by gathering only young leaves with no reddish coloration and cooking well. Some resources have begun to advise against eating pokeweed due to the toxic potential.

The spicy leaves of toothwort (*Dentaria spp.*) can be eaten raw, perhaps added to a sandwich during lunch. All parts of sweet cicely (*Osmorhiza claytoni*) can be eaten raw and have a strong licorice flavor. The emerging shoots of common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) can be steamed like asparagus. Young leaves can be cooked as a green, and flowers can be battered and fried as fritters. Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*), chickweed (*Stellaria spp.*), violet (*Viola spp.*), wood-sorrel (*Oxalis montana*), and dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) are yet more examples of wild greens that may be encountered along trails or in clearings. The tubers of spring beauty (*Claytonia virginica*) can be boiled and used like miniature potatoes. (Don't eat too many at once. A local name for spring beauty in some regions of Appalachia is "tanglegut"—perhaps a nod to what can result from an overindulgence in this wild edible).

Nibbles

The tendrils and young tips of Smilax species (including those known commonly as greenbrier, catbrier, or sawbrier) have a pleasant sour taste and can provide a light snack while hiking or cruising timber. Another favorite is Indian cucumber (*Medeola virginiana*). It's easy to spot, and the larger specimens with a flower spike will have a root that's roughly half the size of an adult's pinky finger. It's crisp and reminiscent of an actual cucumber.

The flowers and fruits that dangle from the underside of Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*) can be eaten fresh and taste a lot like uncooked green peas.



The flowers and heart-shaped leaves of native violets are common on the forest floor.



White Oak acorns



Indian cucumber



Cattails, the king of wild edibles



Common milkweed



Red bud



Spicebush



Sassafras leaves

Speaking of peas, the blossoms of redbud (*Cercis canadensis*) can be eaten fresh, and the seedpods can be tossed into a stir-fry before they get overly mature. Wild rose hips—from both native roses and the invasive multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*)—are high in vitamin C and can even be found lingering in the winter months. In fact, the cooler temperatures raise the sugar content of these fruits, improving their taste.

Beverages

Young needles from trees in the pine family can be steeped to make a citrusy tea that's high in vitamin C. Eastern hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) is included in that category, but the name is misleading. Socrates was sentenced to death by drinking hemlock, but that refers to a totally different herbaceous plant that grows in marshy fields. The herbaceous pasture weed is deadly toxic. The needles of the hemlock tree are safe for making beverages.

When the American colonists had trouble getting tea, an attractive wildflower they substituted became known as New Jersey tea (*Ceanothus americanus*). Leaves should be collected in summer, dried and stored for later use. Chicory (*Cichorium intybus*) coffee is an acquired taste, but it's been common in our history, and coffee mixed with chicory can still be found on grocery shelves. The roots are sliced, roasted, and ground to make the hot, strong beverage.

The leaves and twigs of spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) make a pleasantly aromatic tea. Like New Jersey tea, the spicebush plant is valuable for pollinators, so adding these to your landscape makes sense on more than one level. Sassafras tea is made by boiling the root bark, and dried sassafras leaves are known as the spice filé (as in filé gumbo). Similar to pokeweed, sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*) was popular traditionally but is now avoided by some, due to its being labeled as having carcinogenic properties.

Getting Started

If new to wild edibles, invest in a good guidebook for the region where you'll be foraging. Peterson Field Guides, for instance, publishes a well-organized and user-friendly reference for the eastern and central U.S. Several online resources are also helpful, especially for cross-referencing a field guide. The website <http://www.eattheweeds.com> is a good one. YouTube can be excellent for finding preparation instructions for a particular plant. State parks and naturalist rallies are good places to find in-the-field learning opportunities with experts. Seeing a plant in the field is usually preferable to reading about it.

Wild edible plants may never make up a measurable portion of your diet, nor are there many plants that will cure a hunger pang as well as a can of sardines might, but learning a few wild edibles has its own rewards. And once you become acquainted with some basic ones, it's a skillset that can be built upon gradually over a lifetime in the woods. ■

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