

Appalachian Edible Wild Plants

ASPI Technical Series

Introduction

When the snow would begin to melt in March and early spring to push back the edges of winter, the old women would come out -- foraging for the first wild greens of the season. This is a memory many of us in Appalachia hold -- walking through the fields with our grandmothers learning where to find the tastiest edibles -- what to eat and what to leave alone. As time passed and we have become more urban in thought, buying our pre-packaged food from the grocery chain, we have forgotten those lessons -- forgotten the joy of walking through a dew wet meadow or forest early in the morning, forgotten (or never known) the thrill of spotting a favorite edible in a place we hadn't noticed before.

There are some 50,000 edible plant species in the world, but the average American eats only 30 of these. Wild foods offer tasty and nutritious alternatives and additions to our typical diet. Many species of wild edibles are plentiful and usually easy to identify and gather. Some of the tastiest and most abundant wild foods will grow almost anywhere. The potential for foraging is not limited to wooded or even rural areas. In fact introduced species abound on disturbed ground. Anywhere there is a clump of "weeds" (including gardens, where the fight against weeds is constant) there is in all likelihood one or more edible species. Learning to identify, gather and prepare this free bounty can be exciting and fun and offers opportunities to become more familiar with the land and the natural cycles.

* NOTE: The term "wild" is used to refer to non-cultivated plants. Many plant species growing free in Appalachia are not native but were introduced by European settlers by accident as garden cultivars. Over the years they escaped into the woods and fields to become "wild". There are species which are indeed wild natives, but many are endangered and should not be gathered. It is always preferable to gather quantities of introduced species rather than native ones.

Benefits of Eating Wild Foods

1. Provides fresh harvest before and after most gardens are producing.
2. Saves money -- foraged foods are free.
3. Expands the variety of the typical diet.
4. Develops an awareness of the land and seasons
5. Is incentive to avoid using herbicides. When we view as food, there is no "need" to eradicate them.

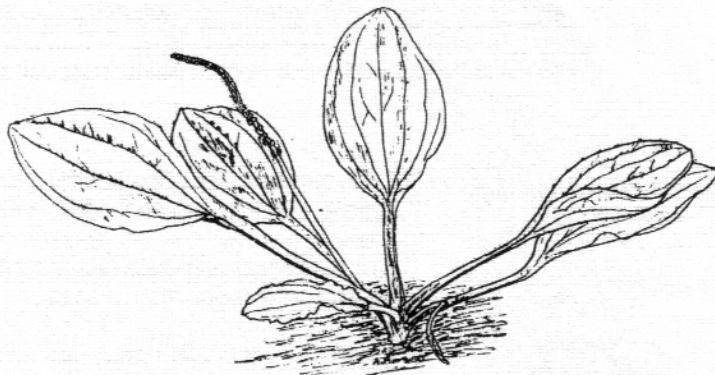
Ethics of Gathering

For most wild edibles gather only what can be eaten in the short term since greens rapidly lose their nutritional value with storage. In some cases, where a species is introduced or in abundance, enough can be harvested to dry or preserve. A good principle to remember is to freely gather (within reason) plentiful or "pest" species, while taking only a "mess" or taste of more limited varieties. (The Appalachian concept of "mess" means an amount sufficient for one or two sittings.)

Most greens are perennials and should be broken off at the base of the leaves. Do not pull up the roots unless you plan to eat them. Leaving the root stock will allow more plants to continue growing and to come up the following year.

Do not gather threatened or endangered species. Something should not be eaten simply because it can be eaten. Plants such as orchids (*Orchidaceae* spp.) and trillium (*Trillium* spp.) are rare and should not be gathered. Species of this type should be regarded as protected wildlife, rather than "food".

Gather carefully and avoid damaging surrounding plants. Often individuals will not allow others in their berry patches because of their concern that the vines will be trampled and destroyed. Keep in mind that the health of the individual species is dependent upon the health of the total ecosystem. Go gently into the woods and fields, taking only what you need and leaving everything else essentially as you find it.



Common Plantain

Copyright © 1993, ASPI Publications		Appalachian Wild Edible Plant
Common Name	Scientific Name	Brief Description
Bracken fern	<i>Pteridium aquilinum</i>	large, coarse, erect fronds; claw-shaped fiddleheads covered in silver/gray hair
Cane, large (River Cane)	<i>Arundinaria gigantea</i>	5-30 ft. tall; woody, hollow-stemmed; long flat grass-like leaves; branched older stems
Cattails	<i>Typha</i> spp.	grow in stands; erect sword-like leaves; stiff unbranched stems; brown cylindrical fruit
Chicory	<i>Cichorium intybus</i>	stiff, nearly naked stems; stalkless blue (or white) flowers; dandelion-like basal leaves
Chickweeds	<i>Stellaria</i> spp.; <i>Cerastium</i> spp.	small plants; slender stems (usually smooth, 1 type hairy); small stalked flowers with
Chufa	<i>Cyperus esculentus</i>	3-sided stem; light green grass-like basal leaves; feathered flower cluster; small nut-li
Cleavers (Sticktight)	<i>Galium aparine</i>	square, weak stems with bristles; narrow, whorled leaves; stalked 4-petaled flowers; t
Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum officinale</i>	sharp, irregular lobes on leaves; hollow milky stems; unbranched conspicuous yellow
Day Lily	<i>Hexmerocallis fulva</i>	orange unspotted blossoms (open 1 day); leafless flower stalk; swordlike basal leave
Dock	<i>Rumex</i> spp.	coarse leaves often with wavy margins; dense heads of small greenish flowers or bro
Evening Primrose	<i>Oenothera biennis</i>	(biennial) 1st yr. - low rosette of leaves; 2nd yr. - red stemmed stalk, alternating leaves;
Greenbriar(s)	<i>Smilax</i> spp.	green-stemmed, prickly climbing vines; parallel-veined leaves; small greenish flower
Jerusalem Artichoke	<i>Helianthus tuberosus</i>	tall sunflower; broad rough leaves; hairy stems; upper leaves alternate; large tubers
Kudzu	<i>Pueraria lobata</i>	30-100 ft. trailing or climbing vine; downy young stems; large leaves with broad oval l
Lamb's Quarters	<i>Chenopodium</i> spp.	erect, many-branched variable leaves (upper - narrow, toothless; lower - broadly-toot
Milkweed	<i>Asclepias syriaca</i>	stout, downy, plant; milky juice; domed clusters of flowers (purplish, buff or white); wa
Mint(s)	<i>Mentha</i> spp.	aromatic; square stems; paired leaves; clusters of small lipped flowers
Mustard(s)	<i>Brassica</i> spp.	broad, deeply-lobed lower leaves; slender seed pods; terminal clusters of 4-petaled y
Nettle(s)	<i>Urtica</i> spp.	distinctive stinging hairs; erect, unbranched, paired, toothed leaves; tiny green flower
Plantain	<i>Plantago major</i>	broad, ovate, heavily ribbed basal leaves with trough-like stems; slender headed gree
Pokeweed	<i>Phytolacca americana</i>	large leaves; smooth reddish stems; long stalked flower; clusters of glossy purple-black
Waterleaf (Shawnee)	<i>Hydrophyllum</i> spp.	rosette of basal leaves, marked with lighter green; radiating clusters of 5-petaled whi
Solomon's Seal	<i>Polygonatum biflorum</i>	parallel veined, alternating leaves; arching stem; paired greenish yellow bells, blue-bl
Sorrel(s)	<i>Oxalis</i> spp.	grayish-green clover-like leaves; long leaf stalks on thin stems; yellow or violet flower
Spring Beauty	<i>Claytonia virginica</i>	small white to pale rose 5-petaled wildflower; two thin pointed leaves on each thin ste
Sumac, Staghorn	<i>Rhus typhina</i>	shrub; smooth green bark, raised cross streaks; alternating compound leaves; dark re
Violet(s)	<i>Viola</i> spp.	slender wiry branching stems; oval or heart-shaped leaves; 5-petaled white, yellow or
Wild Asparagus	<i>Asparagus officinalis</i>	feathery bunches of threadlike green branchlets in brownish scale-like leaves; tiny gre
Wild Carrot	<i>Daucus carota</i>	(biennial) hairy-stemmed; lacy flat-topped flower clusters, often a single purple flower
Wild Ginger	<i>Asarum canadense</i>	large, paired heart-shaped leaves; 2 stout, woody, leaf stalks; single 3-lobed, bell-sha
Wild Lettuce	<i>Lactuca</i> spp.	tall, leafy, dandelion-like leaves; long, loosely-branched flower clusters; milky bitter se
Wild Onion/Garlic/Leek	<i>Allium</i> spp.	grasslike basal leaves; small 6-petaled flowers; smells like onion or garlic
Morel	<i>Morchella esculenta</i>	(mushroom) cap is pale tan to gray, spongelike; blunt, cone-shaped; lower end fused t
Puffball	<i>Calvatia gigantea</i>	large, smooth, white, globular mushroom grows from ground; interior flesh pure white

Fruits: Crabapple, Mayapple, Pawpaw, Wild Cherry, Wild Grapes **Nuts:** Acorn, American Chestnut, American Hazelnut, Hickory,

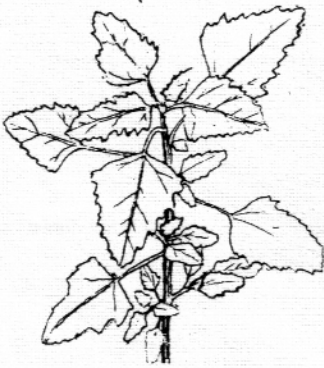
(This list is not inclusive nor is it meant to be a substitute for a field guide. It is provided as an illustration of the great variety

Cooking and

How a particular wild dish is served depends largely upon which parts of the plants are edible. If you haven't eaten wild before, be prepared to be surprised -- pleasantly we hope. Here are a few tips on preparing wild dishes based on which part of the plant is edible. There are wild food cookbooks available, but feel free to experiment. Your recipes could be as local as the wild foods themselves.

Shoots -- Most are eaten raw or cooked and served like asparagus. These are usually steamed lightly or boiled in as little water as possible. Be careful not to overcook. Season to taste.

Plants -- Eaten raw as salad greens. If cooking is required or desired, gather only the young greens and use them as quickly as possible. Again cook in as little water as possible. Mild greens can be mixed with stronger varieties for taste.



Lamb's Quarters

	Edible Parts	Location	Season
	fiddlehead	dry, open sunny places, woods, old fields	Spr.
	shoots, seeds	low ground, riverbanks, swamps	E. Spr. - Sum.
g heads	shoots, stalks, pollen, roots	marshes, shallow water	All Year
milky sap	young leaves, roots	roadsides, disturbed ground	Fall - E. Spr.
deeply notched petals	tender leaves, stems	moist soil, disturbed ground, roadsides	Fall - E. Spr.
e tubers	tubers	damp sandy soil, disturbed ground	All Year
y, 2-lobed fruit	shoots, roots	thickets, woods, disturbed ground	Spr. - E. Sum.
ower becomes puffy white seedball	young leaves, buds, flowers, roots	lawns, roadsides	E. Spr. - E. Sum
	shoots, buds, flowers, tubers	disturbed ground	All Year
n seeds with wings	young leaves	fields, disturbed ground	Spr.
ellow, short-lived blooms	young leaves, roots	dry soil, roadsides, disturbed ground	Fall - E. Spr.
nd small berries	shoots, young leaves, root	woods, thickets	All Year
	tubers	disturbed ground, damp thickets, fields	Fall - E. Spr.
fflets; purple/violet flowers	roots, young leaves	thickets, bordering woods	All Year
d); white stems and underside	tender leaves and tips, seeds	disturbed ground	Sum. - E. Wtr.
r, pointed seed pods	shoots, leaves, buds, flowers, young pods	dry soil, fields, roadsides	Spr. - Sum.
	leaves	wet places, damp meadows	Sum.
ow flowers	young leaves and seedpods, buds, seeds	disturbed ground, fields	E. Spr. - Sum.
n slender forking clusters	shoots and young leaves	roadsides, disturbed ground, thickets	Spr. - Sum.
sh white flowers; leafless stems	young leaves	lawns, disturbed ground	E. Spr.
berries	young shoots (ONLY)	roadsides, fields, disturbed ground	Spr.
or violet flowers	young leaves	woods, moist soil	E. Spr.
k berries dangle beneath leaves	young shoots, roots	woods, thickets	All Year
	leaves and stems	fields, roadsides	Spr. - L. Sum.
irregularly shaped tubers (corms)	corm (tuber)	moist woods, rich soil	E. Spr. - Spr.
berries covered in bright red fuzz	fruit	upland, old fields and openings	Sum.
ue flowers	young leaves, flowers	damp woods, meadows	E. Spr. - Spr.
ish yellow flowers	young shoots	roadsides, fields, and fencerows	E. Spr.
center; stiff 3-forked bracts	roots	fields, disturbed ground	Fall - E. Spr.
d reddish-brown flower	root	rich woods, near rocks	E. Spr. - Fall
	young leaves, developing flowerheads	thickets, clearings, roadsides	Spr. - Sum.
	leaves, underground bulb, bulblets	fields, roadsides, meadows, open woods,	All Year
stem; deeply pitted with whitish ridge	cap and stem	moist woods, orchards	Spr.
th no rudimentary stem or gills	fruiting body	disturbed ground, open places, pastures	L. Sum. - Fall
alnut	Berries: Black Raspberry, Blackberry, Dewberry, Elderberry, Juneberry, Red Raspberry, Wild Strawberry, Wild Blueberry		

and availability of wild edibles in Appalachia and may help you re-examine plants with which you are already familiar.)

Eating Wild

Roots and Tubers -- Most can be cooked and eaten as potato substitutes, or the starch removed and this dried and used as flour.

Flowers -- Large blossoms are often battered and fried, small ones added raw to salads.

Seeds -- Usually eaten as is or ground into flour.

Keep in mind that there are some species of plants which are edible but quite unpalatable. For others, preparation requires extensive effort. This is the case with skunk cabbage, which must be boiled for hours in several changes of water before it can be tolerated. Why eat it when there are so many other plants which are tasty and require fewer resources to prepare.



Pokeweed

Gathering Precautions

If at all possible find an experienced forager to teach you the particulars of gathering. The number of fatally toxic plant species is very small and only a few more can cause illness. However, some plants are edible only at certain stages in their development (as with poke), while for others specific parts are edible (as with mayapple). It is unwise to gather indiscriminately. As you learn the particular species available in your area you will find it easier to remember what to harvest and when. A good rule is -- NEVER EAT ANYTHING YOU CAN'T POSITIVELY IDENTIFY. With many species there is little danger of misidentification, but with others a mistake can be serious or even deadly. For example -- the inexperienced gatherer could easily confuse poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) with wild carrot (*Daucus carota*). Both plants have umbrellalike flower clusters with finely cut leaves. The main difference is in the stems -- wild carrot has a hairy stem and the poison hemlock's is smooth. Another noticeable difference is that wild carrot has several stiff 3-forked leaves (bracts) beneath the flower clusters; the hemlock does not. In such a case a good field guide is indispensable.

This brings up an important point. Gathering wild foods requires the potential forager to practice and develop keen observation skills. One must learn to spot particular plants within groups of other species and become familiar with very specific details of each variety. These lessons are learned through patience, concentration and learning to look beyond what is commonly seen.

Pesticides, herbicides, car exhaust, factory emissions, runoff from parking lots, roads, etc. can poison plants either directly or through soil that has been contaminated. Wild or cultivated plants growing within range of these toxins can potentially harm us, and therefore plants growing directly along roadways, or near industrial areas should be avoided. The same is true in areas where roadsides or powerline corridors are periodically sprayed with herbicides or near fields affected by agri-chemicals drifting from neighboring farms. In

many areas it may be impossible to identify or completely eliminate contaminants, as is the case with supermarket produce. Use your best judgement in deciding where to gather.

Don't try to convert to a totally wild diet all at once. The drastic increase in fiber and reduction of other nutritional elements could unbalance your system. Also, there are some wild edibles which should not be consumed in large amounts. For instance, violets or the berries of False Solomon's Seal act as a laxative when taken in large doses. Some species contain chemicals which can be toxic in large quantities. As with all things, moderation is the best rule. The forager should become as educated as possible about the characteristics of favorite wild edibles.

Gathering Gear

Most foragers will need to obtain one or more good field guides. The guide should have clear concise descriptions of the plants, as well as detailed photos or drawings. Most plants can be accurately identified from a guide and with a little practice the forager should become proficient. We advise the inexperienced gatherer to, if possible, spend some time with an old hand -- someone familiar with what and when to gather.

During the fall and winter when gathering roots the forager will find a "digging stick" helpful. The stick should be made from a stave of hardwood about 3 feet long and 1 inch in diameter. Remove the bark and harden the stick with fire. For green wood 4 or 5 scorplings should be sufficient. Bake, don't burn the wood. A rock can be used to rub the tip of the hardened stick into a chisel shape. The stick is simple to use. Push it into the ground, beside the plant to a depth below or even with the root. Pry slightly and lift to flip the root to the surface. Using a digging stick allows the forager to get to choice roots while minimizing damage to surrounding vegetation.

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