

Forgotten Foods: Introduction to Wild Edible Plants

Long before recorded history, humans foraged for wild edible plants (WEPs) and depended on them for survival. These plants were commonly found in the environment and served as a primary source of food, providing essential calories, vitamins, minerals, and micronutrients. The knowledge of which plants could be eaten and how they should be properly prepared was passed down generation by generation, playing a crucial role in human survival and cultural heritage. However, much of this ancestral knowledge has been lost in modern society due to increased urbanization and modern agricultural advancements.

Our society now depends on a relatively small number of cultivated crops (e.g., corn, wheat, and soybeans). But there is renewed interest in WEPs due to growing public interest in self-sufficiency and environmentally sustainable lifestyles. The rising costs of food are also driving more people to search for less expensive food alternatives like WEPs, which are easily accessible, cost-free, and provide greater variety to our diets.

This publication provides a basic overview of WEPs and the careful attention and accurate knowledge required in foraging for safe eating and sustainability.

Proper Identification and Precautions

While plant foraging can be a rewarding and delicious experience, precautions should be taken to ensure your safety before eating any plant. Here are basic guidelines to follow:

- Before eating any wild plant, you should be 100 percent certain that you have identified it correctly and that it is not poisonous.
- Use at least three different plant resource guides to identify plants correctly. When choosing plant guides, look for books with detailed plant descriptions, easy-to-identify photographs and drawings, habitat information, and a list

of common food uses. See the suggested resource guides in the References section for more information.

- Learn what parts of an edible plant can be safely used and how these parts should be prepared. Just because a plant is considered edible does not mean all its parts are edible. Additionally, some plants must be cooked before consumption to remove toxic compounds. For instance, pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) leaves and stalks should be collected only in the spring, when they are young and tender. They must first be boiled in at least three changes of water to remove toxic compounds before they can be eaten. The roots and berries are highly toxic and should never be eaten.
- Be aware that plant look-alikes exist, and some are poisonous. When in doubt, leave it out! For instance, common purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*) is edible but often grows near the poisonous look-alike, prostrate spurge (*Euphorbia maculata*).
- Before eating a new plant, first do a touch test, such as touching the plant with the underside of your wrist. If the area begins to burn or itch, do not eat the plant. While a wild plant may be considered edible, we all have our own personal sensitivities, and precautions should still be taken. Be sure to eat WEPs in moderation.
- Avoid foraging for plants in areas where chemical contamination from herbicides, pesticides, heavy metals, and industrial runoff may occur, such as roadsides, power line right-of-way areas, and industrial zones. Plants can absorb pollutants from the soil, water, and air. Eating contaminated plants could cause health issues.

Conservation Considerations

It is important to consider the benefits of WEPs for local wildlife survival and ecosystem health. These plants provide food and habitat for local wildlife and should be sustainably harvested to prevent declines in plant populations. In addition, some WEPs are considered non-native invasive species (e.g., kudzu, dandelion). Harvesting these plants is virtually unlimited and removing them from the environment will help regenerate native plant populations.

The following are guidelines that should be considered to conserve WEPs and their habitats.

- **Do not over-harvest native plant populations.** Take no more than 1/3 of any plant or plant population in one location. Leaving enough behind provides resources to wildlife and also sustains the plant population.
- **Leave no trace.** The supplies and food you carry with you while foraging should also be carried back out when you are finished. Also, pick up any pre-existing trash that you happen to find along the way.
- **Always seek permission before foraging on private lands.** Most public lands, such as parks and refuges, do not permit foraging or require a permit.

Table 1. Common wild edible plants. All WEPs should be positively identified using the guidelines listed above.

Common Name	Botanical Name	Plant Part	Use
purslane	<i>Portulaca oleracea</i>	leaves and stems	salads, greens, pickles, and bread
dandelion	<i>Taraxacum officinale</i>	leaves*	salads, greens, fritters, and teas
wood sorrel	<i>Oxalis</i> spp.	leaves* and stems	salads and teas
monarda, bee balm	<i>Monarda</i> spp.	leaves and flowers	salads and teas
wild garlic	<i>Allium canadense</i>	all parts	salads and cooking
lamb's quarters	<i>Chenopodium album</i>	leaves*	salads, greens, and cooking
plantain	<i>Plantago</i> spp.	leaves*	salads and greens
elderberry	<i>Sambucus canadensis</i>	flowers and fruits	pies, jams, jellies, and fritters
blackberry	<i>Rubus</i> spp.	leaves and fruits	fresh, pies, jams, jellies, and drinks
woodland violet	<i>Viola</i> spp.	leaves* and flowers	salads and drinks
sassafras	<i>Sassafras albidum</i>	leaves and roots	teas and flavoring
redbud	<i>Cercis canadensis</i>	flowers	salads and garnish
persimmon	<i>Diospyros virginiana</i>	fruit	fresh, jellies, pudding, and bread
maypop	<i>Passiflora incarnata</i>	fruit	fresh, drink, and jelly
red mulberry	<i>Morus rubra</i>	fruit	fresh, pies, jams, and jellies
spiderwort	<i>Tradescantia virginiana</i>	leaves and stems	salads and greens
rose	<i>Rosa</i> spp.	flowers and hips	salads, garnish, and teas
red clover	<i>Trifolium pratense</i>	leaves* and flowers	salads and teas
amaranth	<i>Amaranthus</i> spp.	leaves*	salads and greens
chickweed	<i>Stellaria media</i>	leaves*	salads and greens
cleavers	<i>Galium aparine</i>	leaves*	salads and greens
muscadine	<i>Vitis rotundifolia</i>	fruit and leaves	jams, jellies, and drinks
honeysuckle	<i>Lonicera japonica</i>	blooms	jams, jellies, and drinks
pokeweed	<i>Phytolacca americana</i>	leaves* and stems	cooked greens
Jerusalem artichoke	<i>Helianthus tuberosus</i>	root	fried or baked root

*Use only young, tender leaves and stems.

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