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# Edible Wild Plants

William H. Gillespie, Former WVDA Assistant Commissioner

Every adult knows dozens of edible wild plants. Test yourself! Count the numerous berries, nuts, fleshy fruits and nibbles that make your woodland strolls so enjoyable. Doesn't your mouth pucker as you remember the acid nip of wild grape tendrils? Doesn't it relax at the thought of the sweet mucilaginous inner bark of black birch or slippery elm? Certainly it does and you have just proven to yourself that edible wild plants are not foreign as you thought they were a moment ago.

Our ancestors apparently used dozens upon dozens of wild plants for food at some time during the year, but such nature lore is now gradually being lost as each generation becomes more urbanized. Also, as our wilderness is reduced to smaller and smaller areas of second and third growth and as various kinds of pollution increases, there are fewer wild plants on which to subsist. Don't be too disheartened, however, because there are enough left to insure the hobbyist of a good time and the naturalist – gourmet of meals worthy of bragging about. It seems important to point out, however, that it is literally impossible to decide at breakfast on any particular day that you are going to have certain wild plants for lunch and to collect them in time. Even the Indians couldn't do this because wild plants are available during particular seasons, just as are our common cultivated plants. For this reason, they must be collected as they are available and preserved for future use. For example, you can eat your fill of fresh berries at the peak of the season, but, after mid-summer, they disappear and cannot be enjoyed again until the succeeding year. Also, you can feast on ramps and other early pot herbs in the Spring, but you cannot find them in the fall, unless you have removed the roots to your basement. For this reason, it is quite an experience to attempt to train people to live in the wild during times of emergency. It is highly improbable that other than a well-trained naturalist can find enough plants at any given time to make a real contribution to living in the wilds.

Each beginner should have an expert accompany him on the first few collecting trips.

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# Spring Pot Herbs

## Ramps

Ramps or wild leeks are a delicious onion-like delicacy of higher Appalachian forests. Heartier gourmets often search them out before they push their way about the matted leaves of the forest floor, but they are easier to collect in mid-April or early May when the green tops serve as guides. Perhaps, the most common method of preparation is to boil both the bulbs and the leaves until tender in lightly salted water. They are often eaten with no other preparation, although such parboiling, followed by mild frying in bacon grease, renders them nearly irresistible. An equally good method of preparation, especially when camped along a favorite trout stream, is to fry the plants until tender and to break eggs over the top and stir until well-scrambled. If the meal happens to include a piece of sour-dough bread and is served just at the crack of dawn on a crisp Spring morning, then those lucky enough to partake of such a feast can trustfully say that they have eaten the finest that nature has to offer. A sportsman club once published over one hundred recipes for using ramps; so, they can be fixed in a different way each day. However, if you tire of cooking and want to go out for dinner, visit one of the "ramp feeds" held in West Virginia each year. If you don't appreciate pot herbs, they may serve you ramp soup or ramp pickles with side meat and saffron tea as fillers.

## Pokeweed

Pokeweed or "Poke" is perhaps the most widely used "green" in central Appalachia. In fact, bundles of the stalks are often sold in produce and roadside markets throughout the State. The young, up to 6-8 inch shoots, when parboiled until tender and served with a drop of good vinegar have no equal as a spinach substitute. Remember, however, that the root is very poisonous as are all parts of the more mature plants which have developed the reddish color. Enthusiasts often dig poke roots and place them in a basket of dirt in the cellar or basement where, with the addition of water, new shoots soon appear and a fine supply of greens can be enjoyed all winter long.

## Sweets

The well-known maple sugar and syrup is a wild food prepared from the collected sap of sugar maple or box elder trees. The sap is reduced about 30 to 1 by boiling for syrup and its further evaporated for sugar. The sap from hickory, butternut and doubtless other trees can also be used although it takes several more gallons to get a gallon of syrup. Maple sap is usually collected in February when warm days and freezing nights exert an influence on "sap runs".

And lastly, if you need a piece of chewing gum to while away the time between meals, it might be worthwhile to mention that the original chewing gum was really spruce gum. It was sold under the name of the "State of Main Pure Spruce Gum" and was prepared from the ordinary spruce gum which flows from wounds on red spruce trees. This material, cut into small squares and rolled in confectioners sugar, is still available in some of the northern states as a novelty. It makes a rather good chewing gum and it lasts for a long time, although to some the taste may be more than a little reminiscent of turpentine.

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however, to refuse to eat such a delicious tidbit because of the possibility of its serving as a temporary shelter for another creature. Don't cast them aside, just consider the tiny worm as a protein supplement and eat away.

The fresh fruit also makes excellent pies and jelly or it can be crushed, dried and stored for winter.

The Indians used sarvisberries to sweeten their pemmican which was pounded jerky (dried beef, deer or buffalo) over which melted, unsalted fat had been poured.

## Flour

Flour is a staple item in nearly all diets; so the discussion of edible wild plants without a specific discussion of flour would be wholly misleading. Although there are several other sources, oak is a really plentiful tree and acorn flour is well known. Any acorn can be used, but the ones from white oak are the better source. If, however, red oak acorns are all that is available, the flour should be leached with slowly running water or boiled to remove the tannin. A yellow color indicates that you are succeeding in your efforts which should be continued until it has been extracted.

The acorns are shelled, dried and then ground into flour. I find that the best method of grinding is to use a grain mill, which you can find online. The resulting flour or meal is mixed equally with wheat flour or meal for all uses to which flour or corn meal can be used. Jack-in-the-Pulpit "bulbs" and Skunk Cabbage roots are other excellent flour sources.

## Drinks

There are literally dozens of beverage substitutes abounding in Nature's garden. The shade dried leaves of New Jersey Tea and the leaves of our common violets were commonly used as tea substitutes during earlier periods in this country; sassafras tea, prepared from the bark of sassafras roots, and birch tea, prepared by boiling birch twigs, are also well known; the roots of common roadside Chicory are collected, dried and ground as a coffee substitute and the velvet-like hairy covering of the red berries of Smooth and Stag horn Sumacs both contain an acid-like juice that makes a good cool drink. In this last instance, it is usually best to dip the entire pod in warm water to remove any insects, crush the pod in cool water, strain, add water and ice and sweeten to suit the taste. The best results are obtained if it is prepared as needed because it does go "flat" rather easily.

## Mustard

Black Mustard is one of the several wild mustards which grows as introduced weeds in West Virginia. Commercially, the seeds of this plant are ground and blended for mustard and the young plants are sold as the familiar mustard greens. As a pot herb, young plants are collected and parboiled for 20 to 25 minutes in mildly salted water. Also, it's fun, but not particularly productive, to make one's own mustard. This is done by extracting the seeds from the nearly-ripe seed pods, grinding them into powder and then mixing the powder with the mild vinegar and a slight touch of flour and water. It is said that our wild mustards cannot be separated on taste; so, any of them should add to a "pot" of greens.

## Dandelion

The common dandelion, which springs up anywhere that it is not wanted, is a plant that has to be eaten to be truly appreciated. Like Poke, the roots can be kept in a basket of dirt in the cellar or basement for a steady supply of greens all winter long. Many people seem to prefer leaves produced in such semi-darkness as they are more tender and milder. Also, it is hard to beat fresh, young dandelion leaves cut up in a salad along with radishes and onions and accented with a sweetened oil and vinegar. As a pot herb, the young leaves are customarily boiled about 15 minutes in lightly salted water, but a milder product results if the water is changed at least once during the cooking process and if other greens are intermixed. Some people seem to like the rather strong tea which is made by boiling dried, mature leaves, but the taste has to be classified as somewhat medicinal. Finally, the bloom is used as the main ingredient in the always refreshing Dandelion wine for which there are nearly as many recipes as there are winemakers.



## Marsh Marigold

Pot herbs are rather scarce in the higher mountains, but there is one, the Marsh Marigold, that occurs in abundance in swampy areas and along ditch banks. The young leaves are collected, before the plants flower and are boiled, with at least two water changes, until tender. This normally takes about 25 minutes. The water changes are suggested because the plant is said to be poisonous in the raw stage.

## Quickweed

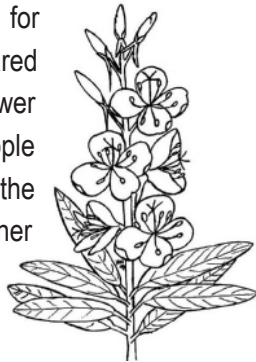
There are few gardeners who would argue against Galinsoga or Quickweed being listed as the most pestiferous of all garden weeds, but few know that it is a delicious food. The young plants are boiled for 15 to 25 minutes and then served with butter or vinegar as a dressing. Although the taste is pleasant, it is really not distinctive; so many people prefer to mix this plant with other greens such as mustard or dandelion.

## Plantain

The common dooyard plantain is used as a pot herb, although only the very young leaves are collected because of their stringy nature. These are usually boiled 20 to 25 minutes or until tender. One author has suggested dipping the larger leaves in a batter of flour, eggs and milk and frying them for up to 30 minutes over a low heat. The result is a "plantain-chip" which is tasty as a cold snack or filling as a main course.

## Fireweed

Fireweed, a passable spinach substitute, is also available in the higher mountains. The young plants are prepared by boiling for about 10 minutes. Also, a rather nice tea can be prepared by boiling mature, shade-dried leaves of this beautiful flower and the petals can be eaten raw in salads. Some people enjoy eating the chewy pith of the mature plants, but the peeling process is considered to be a lot of work for other than an emergency food.



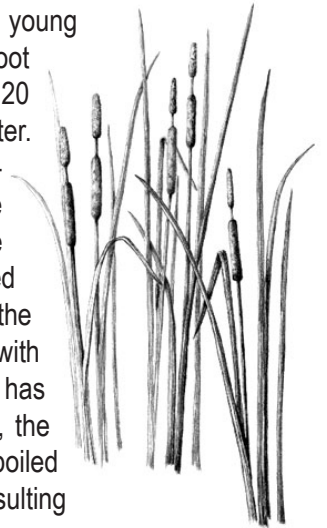
## Nettles

The next time you walk through a clump and moan as the tiny, prickly hairs penetrate your trousers and tickle your knees, resolve to get even by eating the plant out of existence. You won't regret taking such an oath because young, tender nettles are unsurpassed as a green when boiled for 10 to 12 minutes in a minimum of water and served with a butter dressing. They are used as a staple food in some countries.

that the shells are exceedingly hard and should be removed before eating.

## Cattails

Cattails are an all-purpose wild food. The young shoots are collected when they are about one foot high or less, peeled and eaten raw, or boiled for 20 minutes and served over toast with melted butter. In mid-summer, the young flower stalks are collected, removed from their leaves and boiled. The female flowers are then nibbled off much as one would eat corn-on-the-cob or they can be removed and seasoned with salt, pepper and butter. Also, the pollen is collected and mixed on a 50-50 basis with wheat flour and baked into bread or cakes and it has been used commercially for pancakes. Finally, the roots of cattails can be collected, peeled and boiled as a vegetable, or dried and ground with the resulting meal being stored for later usage.



## Wild Onions

Wild onions have not been mentioned, but they can be used in any way that the commercially purchased product can be, although a little seems to go a long way. Some people enjoy them raw in salads while others cook them with an assortment of pot herbs.

## Fresh Fruit

Fresh fruit is usually easy to locate in season and the numerous kinds range from wild strawberries to sarvisberries in mid-to-late June to persimmons in late fall. In between, the innumerable blackberries, raspberries, dewberries, paw paws, gooseberries, teaberries, blueberries, wild cherries, elderberries and grape, to mention only a few, are enjoyed raw or are collected and preserved for the winter months.

There is little reason to dwell on such common food sources, but a word about sarvisberries is needed. They are truly one of early summer's greatest delights. Normally, the tiny apple-like fruits are inhabited by small insect larvae or worms if the trees are growing below 3,000 feet in elevation. Above the elevation, the winters are usually severe enough to kill the mature insects and as they are not present to lay eggs, fruit is usually wormless. It is really a shame,

## Fawn Lily

Fawn Lily is another Spring wildflower that should not be eaten, but, when the underground bulbs are collected and boiled for 20 minutes in salty water they are very tasty and they should be considered in any emergency.

## Queen Anne's Lace

Wild carrot or Queen Anne's Lace is the parent of our common garden carrot which has been improved over the years by breeding. It is possible to eat the roots of the wild plant, and many other people consider them to be sweeter than the cultivated variety, but I have always found them to be tough, stringy and even bitter. Perhaps if they were moved to a good loamy soil, they would improve in flavor.



## Arrow Leaf

"Indian potatoes" are borne at the tips of the root-stalks of Arrow Leaf or Arrow Head, which seems to grow in nearly every shallow pond or lagoon. The collection of these "potatoes" is somewhat of a job as it is necessary to seek them out in the mud, but a heavy garden rake greatly speeds the process. The "tubers" are peeled, boiled for 20 to 25 minutes in lightly salted water with melted butter. They can also be baked and probably can be used in any way that potatoes can be.

## Cow Lily

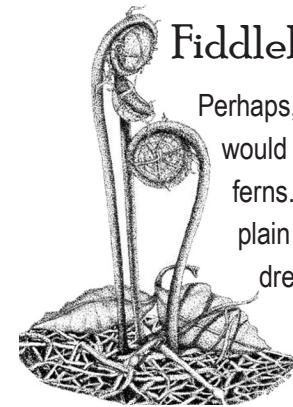
While considering starchy roots, we should mention Cow Lily, the rootstalks of which are buried deeply in the mud of shallow ponds. After collection, the roots are washed and boiled or baked, or they can be peeled, sliced, dried and ground into a passable flour or meal. If the meal is soaked in water and the water is discarded before cooking, it will have a harsh "bite" or taste and when cooked for several minutes in a minimum amount of water, it provides a good cereal. As a novelty, collect some of the seeds, dry them slowly and then "pop" or parch them over a low fire in oil, as you would popcorn. A slight drawback is

## Chickweed

Many people consider Chickweed to be superior to spinach as a green when boiled for several minutes and served with just a sprinkle of vinegar. It is also an excellent salad ingredient.

## Black Locust

In late May, the creamy white flowers of Black Locust can be collected, dipped into warm salty water to remove insects and fried over a low heat. The result is a very noteworthy treat and one that can and often does serve as a meat substitute in "wild" dinners.



## Fiddleheads

Perhaps, one of the easiest plants to identify and collect as food would be the young "fiddleheads" of cinnamon and Bracken ferns. Just rub off the fuzz and boil for 30 to 45 minutes in plain water. Then serve over toast with salt and butter as the dressing. Small pieces can also be added raw to salads.

# Other Pot Herbs

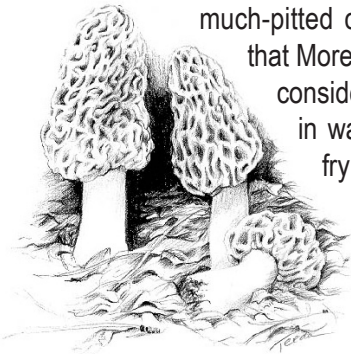
Finally, in a list of easily identified pot herbs, one just has to include Shepherd's Purse, Pigweed or Lambs Quarters and the various docks, especially Curly or Sour Dock.

## Salads

As the summer season advances, other very noteworthy wild plants with delicate flavor appear. For example, try freshly-picked sheepsoil as a salad ingredient. The sour taste is a novel, but a pleasant addition to the table. It can also be mixed with young leaves of wild lettuce for a sour-bitter combination or with very young plants of stone crop or even young leaves and flower buds from any common violet. Salt, pepper and just a drop of oil and vinegar is all that is needed to complete a nature salad that will delight any hungry person.

## Mushrooms

If you haven't been taught to recognize the common edible mushrooms, it would be well to start collecting with the Morel, as the haystack shape of the much-pitted cap is easy to identify. Some collectors state that Morels are tough and leathery, but most spokesmen consider them to be delicious. For a starter, dip them in warm, salted water, to remove any insects, and fry them over a medium heat in butter, with salt and pepper as the seasoning. Another common method is to split them open and to stuff them with chopped, cooked meat, especially chicken along with a few bread crumbs, after which they are tied together and baked until tender.



Morel Mushrooms

Puffballs are just as easy to identify as are the Morels and they are a more versatile food although they must be eaten while the inside of the "ball" is still firm and white. A few can usually be found anytime during the warm months, but the larger ones – those a foot or more in diameter – are usually found in late summer. Most cooks peel and slice the ball and then fry the slices in butter. Others dip the slices in a mixture of beaten eggs and cracker

crumbs before frying, while still others add small raw pieces to salads. Discard specimens in which a stalk seems to run through the ball because this indicates that it's an unripe specimen of a stalk mushroom and not a puffball.

Another easily recognized mushroom is the sulphur-fungus that grows on decaying logs and trees. The bright, yellow-orange color of the "shells" or "brackets" is not likely to be confused after one being seen and the delicate chicken-like flavor, after being fried in butter, is equally hard to forget.

A forth "safe" species is the honey mushroom. This above ground portion of the shoestring wood-rotting fungus is delicious when lightly fried in butter and then folded into an omelet. It can be found in circle-like clumps around decaying stumps during the fall months and is one of the common mushrooms that can be dried in the oven for wintertime usage. Dried specimens, after an hour's soaking in warm water or milk, are cooked as if freshly picked.

It is well to remember that there is no reliable "rule-of-thumb" to use as a guide in separating poisonous mushrooms from the edible varieties. For example, the finding of small worms inside of mushrooms does not mean that they are non-poisonous and the cooking of silver coins or spoons in mushrooms that are poisonous is just another tale.

# Starchy Vegetable Substitutes

## Spring Beauty

The beautiful Spring Beauty has an underground base that, when eaten raw, or when peeled and boiled in salted water for about 20 minutes, serves as a potato substitute. It is really a shame to destroy such beautiful flowers for food: so they should not be eaten except in times of emergency. Spring Beauty is known as "Tanglegut" in certain areas, apparently because it causes stomach cramps when eaten as a green.

