

# Teaming with Wild Foods

## Peoples Food!

**The need for wild foods** – As humans moved out of the jungle and across the world, we quickly learned how to move our favorite plants with us. Early colonizers of the Americas reported plant polycultures managed by native peoples to produce their favorite foods. Pilgrims and colonizers themselves brought their favorite food and medicine with them. A few of these stuck with us and became domesticated vegetables, while others were banished to the “weeds” category. As our food supply became increasingly profit-driven (rather than nutrition-driven), many easy and medicinal vegetables and herbs were replaced by plants that better utilized the industrialization of modern farming. Products that could be grown cheaply elsewhere, shipped globally, and sold to wage-earners. Broad-scale commodity crop farming and industrial meat production are bar none the largest contributors to the loss of habitat and biodiversity across the world. Not to mention the toxic herbicide market used to kill now-demonized “weeds.” Modern agriculture is the number one cause of climate change, as it has mutilated the earth’s landscapes at a scale we can barely comprehend. Wild plants have the ability to heal the earth and us humans... here’s how.



**Healing the Earth** – Many of the most common weeds have the ability to grow in places where other plants struggle. When humans create a parking lot or a road or a farm, they often make a big mess, destroying trees, compacting soil, bringing in foreign materials (natural and otherwise). The plant mixtures that colonize these areas often have a few species in their mix that grow exceedingly well in the absence of nutrients; these are often called, “invasive species.” What these plants are actually doing is bringing nutrients up to the surface that are bound tightly in the soil (often from great depths) and turning them into a form that is biologically active and available to other plants. They are also doing a lot to improve the structure of the soil they are in. They remediate the landscape so it is habitable for diverse and native plants again. Chicories, Queen Annes Lace, and Sweet Clover have tough tap roots and attend to their work in traffic medians and sidewalk edges that have been compacted by machinery. Phragmites pulls toxins out of water-logged soils – something we see a LOT in the ditches of northeast Ohio. Legumes generally grow in areas where the nitrogen cycle has been disturbed and minerals are freely available. Driving through Appalachia I see many highway hillsides covered with Black Locust, Korean Lespedeza, Autumn Olive, and various clovers. As these plants come initially to colonize what is essentially a moonscape, they create the conditions for later waves of higher quality mostly native plants. The initial plants also create homes for birds and mice and others who bring the seeds from other places so the site can evolve.

**Healing the People** – Because wild plants are able to extract nutrients out of soils that are generally deficient, they have nutrient profiles that exceed grocery store food. Human bodies evolved with wild food as a major part of our diet. Burdock has seen a surge in popularity in recent years because of its use in macrobiotic diets. Now you can buy it for extravagant prices in high end groceries. Jerusalem artichokes are the same way. Wild mushrooms and Spicebush berries are making their way onto the chopping block of the finest chefs and food enthusiasts in the country. Many wild foods are also being recognized for their therapeutic uses. Herbal supplements are taking over pharmacy shelves; I'm surprised at how many wild plants are being sold as capsules and teas. Wild foods have the capacity to heal us through their mineral and nutritional density as well as their herbal actions. *Please find yourself a local herbalist before experimenting with herbal medicine.* Much of the hoopla is over flavor, but I believe the most powerful message about wild foods is **they are everywhere.**

## Foraging!

One of the great things about wild greens and roots are that they are so easily found! That being said there are some precautions for foraging:

1. What is the history of the land you're harvesting from? We want to be careful about persistent chemicals in our wild foods. Unfortunately many places in this world that look to be wild actually have a rather traumatic history. Roadsides are a culprit of course, with road salts and diesel sprays. Abandoned agricultural fields and orchards can have chemicals left over in the soil from years of application. Houses used lead paint in the past and it has found its way into the soil.

Anything gathered in the wild should be cleaned at least as well as the stuff you get in the supermarket (really well). Be picky about where you harvest from.

All of this must be countered by your **need for food**, if you are starving it doesn't really matter if there are some potential chemical or heavy metal residues.

2. How abundant is the plant? When plants are plentiful it is easier and more ethical for us to get what we need. Never take all of the plants; only **gather one third or less** of what is available. Overharvesting is a problem. Ginseng is the prime example; many of the places where this plant was plentiful in the past it is now non-existent. It may behoove us to learn how to propagate these plants before we think of harvesting them. If we can understand where and how the plants want to grow, we can expand them and also expand our foraging opportunities.



3. What are your food sensitivities? If you are a person that has many food sensitivities then the introduction of new foods should be done very slowly. Taste things in small amounts, take time and see how your body feels after the introduction of new foods. If you generally don't have troubles with new foods it is still a good idea to not indulge in too much of one new food at a time. Be aware of your body and how you feel.

4. Do you know how to identify plants? Get yourself a field identification guide. This is the biggest step a novice can take towards becoming proficient as a wild crafter. Positive identification is crucial to making your excursion into wild foods a safe and pleasurable one. Once you are able to make positive id's in your region, find out which plants are poisonous and learn those first. Think of plants as being on a spectrum with poisonous plants on one end and quality wild foods on the other. The plants in between will vary in qualities; use your taste buds and your palette to decide which you like. Chefs have been pairing plants based on their tastes and qualities since forever- engage yourself in this art.

## Using Wild Greens!

**Bitter greens:** Many wild plants have this characteristic. I recommend using them as 10-25 % of salads. Some of the wild plants with the longest history of use as food can be too bitter for our modern palettes. What one person considers bitter may not even register for someone else. Never less: How to make bitter greens more palatable: 1. Cook them. Cooking these greens (briefly) will dispel most of the bitterness in them, overcooking them will turn them to mush. 2. Blanch them. Once you have identified some wild greens that you want to eat, roll a log over them or place a black 5 gallon bucket over them. The idea here is to block off all light from this growing plant. What you will get in a few months (during the growing season) is a plant that has lost most or all of its coloration. This makes the plant much milder in taste and is a good way to trick people into thinking you fancy. This is how white asparagus is produced. 3. Dry them. When dried many wild greens intense flavor will diminish a bit. Drying is ideal for accessing wild greens during the winter, as long as they are stored properly. Sprinkle in soups and stews.



Examples of bitter greens in NE Ohio: dandelion, burdock, chicory, bitter cress, yarrow, mugwort, ox-eye daisy, sow thistle, wild lettuce, hawkweed, creeping charlie, watercress

**Bulk salad greens:** These are greens that can make up 50-75 % of a salad. They are generally mild to bland in flavor (think lettuce) and will compose the bulk of the leaves in the salad. These are the plants that I'm always trying to find more of and increase the growth of in my area.

Bulk salad plants: chickweed, mallow sp., plantain, basswood leaves, sheep sorrel, sassafras leaves

**Intensely flavored herbs:** These plants generally will only be a small percentage of your salads as these intense flavors are better appreciated in small amounts. I like to chop these types of herbs quite finely over my salads and make sure that they are fully incorporated throughout.

Intensely flavored herbs: wild mints, toothwort, spicebush leaves, spruce tips

## Using Wild Roots!

Wild roots can potentially address a major part of our dietary needs. They did so for the native peoples of this land. The best thing about many wild roots is that they are available most times of the year if you know where to look. This is why it's always a good idea to **scout out your foods before you harvest them**. That way you will know where your food is when you need it.



### 2 major groups of wild roots:

1. Biennials- These are plants that grow as a rosette their first year and flower the second. A rosette is just a low growing bunch of leaves coming from a central point. These plants need to go through a cold period during the winter before they can flower; it is during this period that we can take advantage to harvest. It is possible to harvest these plants anytime from germination until 1 year later when the plant starts to grow after winter and flower. However, the best time to harvest is in the fall because this is when the plants put their energy into their roots to survive winter, and there is enough root to eat.

Biennial wild roots- burdock, wild carrot, evening primrose, wild goatsbeard, wild parsnip

2. Perennials- These are plants that live several years or more. They are also usually harvested during the fall and winter when their reserves are in the root, but can be harvested more flexibly in other seasons considering their persistent nature. These plants can also be easily propagated and brought to new areas quite easily, including the veggie garden!

Perennial wild roots- Jerusalem artichoke, groundnut, wood betony, dandelion, trout lily, Solomon seal

