



wild food



what is it?

Wild food is anything edible that has had no management to increase its production. It also encompasses fishing, coastal foraging, wild mushrooms, crayfish and game, but we've listed these as separate topics; we're focusing here mainly on wild land plants (leaves, berries, fruits, nuts, roots or sap). Wild food was once necessary for human survival, but now most traditional knowledge of wild food has been lost. In recent years there has been a widespread revival in foraging, and you can now attend courses all over the UK.

Many of the plant species that we view as weeds are edible and nutritious – modern farming favours foods that have been cultivated from their wild ancestors. We clear away 'weeds' to grow crops, yet many wild plants are more nutritious than their cultivated counterparts. For example the edible wild plant 'fat hen' contains more iron and protein than spinach, and more vitamin B and calcium than cabbage. As with many other wild foods it can also be cooked in the same way as the vegetables we regularly eat. Wild food plants and fungi form a part of the rich diversity of species that is vital to the functioning of ecosystems. Many of these species are being lost due to habitat destruction and pollution. Collecting wild food is much more popular in continental Europe. In one region of Finland 68% of households pick wild fungi for consumption – unimaginable here in Britain.



A good foraging basket is very useful to carry with you in the autumn, you never know what you might come across on a walk.



Nettle omlette: many wild foods can be cooked like the cultivated vegetables that we're used to eating.

what are the benefits?

It's free! And as long as we're sensitive when harvesting, wild food can be beneficial to the environment - no packaging, pesticides or food miles if you harvest locally. It can also foster appreciation of nature, resulting in greater conservation of species. For example, if we wish to harvest wild garlic every spring, we might be more vocal if it's under threat!

Eating a range of different species maintains biodiversity – the opposite of intensive, monoculture farming, where target species are favoured over wild species, and are grown intensively using pesticides, which can have detrimental effects on wildlife.

Many wild animals that can be eaten are seen as pests that have to be controlled, and are wasted. For example, the grey squirrel, an introduced species that causes damage to tree saplings and forces out our native red squirrel. If they're culled, isn't it better to eat them in preference to animals that are fed intensively-grown crops, housed indoors, pumped with antibiotics and transported many miles to reach your plate?

Consuming wild food can instill respect for nature, illustrating our dependency on it for survival. It also highlights the importance of seasonality and offers an alternative to our current globalised food system, where we can buy anything at any time of year.

Our prehistoric ancestors browsed on wild foods from their local area, gaining the nutrients needed for healthy immune systems. Collecting wild foods has a therapeutic value and is a great incentive to enjoy the countryside. Eating food from your landscape, in the season it grows, can provide a real sense of connection to the land and time of year.



Wild garlic (or ramsons) grows in abundance in the spring, giving off a strong smell. It's delicious in salads or used as a flavouring in cooking.

what can I do?

Foraging for wild food is exciting, as you never know what you're going to find. Wild plants and fungi grow in many places, even on wasteland in towns.

Learning from someone who knows about wild food is a great start – a mentor or course provider. Being shown the plants in their natural habitat is really helpful when wanting to find and identify them later.

Getting a good book or two will really help – especially if you can take them with you when you go out foraging. It can be a good idea to have a field guide and a wild food book – as field guides are often much more accurate for identification, but don't necessarily tell you whether you can eat things.

Anyone can pick their own wild plants and fungi; however there are some simple principles, and laws, that must be followed, for your own safety, and the preservation of plant populations.

Safe foraging:

- Be 100% sure of your plant identification... 'if in doubt, leave it out'. We have some seriously poisonous plants in the UK, so get to know them, as well as getting to know the edible ones.
- Double check the location you are foraging – avoid pesticides or other toxic substances, as well as foraging beside busy roads.

- If you're foraging for water plants, always cook them – the risk of Liver Fluke and other water-borne illnesses is high in the UK.

Responsible foraging:

- Take only what you need and can realistically eat.
- Leave plenty behind. Different people have different proportions they like to leave - always leave some for wildlife and other foragers.
- Don't pick rare or endangered plants – even if they're in your wild food book! Some species are protected by law. For a list see the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland.
- Make sure you have permission from the landowner if necessary. It's illegal to dig up a plant without permission. Species must not be picked from a National Nature Reserve (NNR) or Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) without permission.
- Gather plants from healthy, plentiful populations.
- Be aware of where you're treading - be careful of damaging other plants as you reach for the juiciest blackberries! Try to damage the plant you're picking from as little as possible.

If you're a beginner, try picking obvious species that you're already familiar with – for example nettles or dandelions. Just as importantly, familiarise yourself with the poisonous plants in your area too. Never eat any species that you are unsure of. Remember that many species are poisonous and some must be cooked to remove toxins.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/wild-food for more info, courses, links, books, including:
- Gary Lincoff, *the Joy of Foraging*
- Robin Harford, *the Eatweeds Cookbook*
- John Rensten, *the Edible City*
- bsbi.org – Botanical Soc. of Britain & Ireland
- bit.ly/37MNcoN – free urban foraging guide
- wildfooduk.com/wild-food-recipes – recipes
- bit.ly/37RfD4Q – foraging month-by-month

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