

Wild Food and Foraging

Some ideas for harvesting wild foods

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Wild food is an increasingly popular issue, being perceived as either a 'free' source of food or something that we can enjoy as a form of 'gastro-recreation'. From the work of John Seymour and Richard Mabey in the 70's, to the more recent TV programmes of Ray Mears and Bear Grylls, food foraging is promoted as an improving outdoor activity. But this approach often misses one of the most important points – wild food isn't an end in itself, but it's something that we can integrate into our existing food sourcing and preparation activity to add diversity and character to our diet.

The key thing about this briefing is that it's not a "guide" to foraging and wild food – there's plenty of them out there already, and we see no need to endlessly replicate this information. Instead we outline a framework for how you might learn more about wild food, develop your skills for food foraging, and most importantly finding ways to integrate your use of wild food within a more sustainable approach to planning your own 'food system'. There are plenty of good books out there on wild food – and we've listed a number in the bibliography at the end. What we do in this guide is try and help you get your head around the *process* of collecting wild foods.

Motivations and practical limitations

There's a rather romanticised, over-simplified view of wild food; *you go out, pick some food and bring it home to eat*. In reality it's a little more difficult: the idealised plants shown in books are often not so easily found in the countryside, especially outside of their prime flowering season; the local geology and climate of your area can have a pronounced effect on what species grow where, and how well/if they grow; in many areas of the UK, especially where mechanised arable farming dominates, the rural biodiversity has been decimated for the last fifty years and so finding the diversity of plants listed in the wild food books is not that easy (although you might find small, undisturbed pockets here and there). For these reasons foraging isn't something that can be taught or demonstrated – it's something that must be learned and understood through practical experience.

Collecting wild food is not like going to the supermarket – you don't just turn up and eat! You need to get to know an area, understand the wild ecology and how it varies from site to site, and in order to do this you'll need to visit your foraging area(s) on a regular basis. Some plants, or rather the parts of the plant that we're interested in (flowers, fresh leaf tips or berries) might only be available for a few weeks, or even a few days, and to be there at the right time you have to regularly visit and 'live with' the land.

The need to gain "understanding" of wild foods is also important when we select influences to develop our own knowledge. If we follow the 'survivalist' mode of learning (generalising, Bear Grylls and similar

Some rules and restrictions

Wild food shouldn't be seen as an unrestricted natural larder – the free counterpart to the modern supermarket. Quite apart from the ecological implications, there simply isn't enough land for our present population to live like hunter-gathers (the Stone Age hunter-gatherer population of the British Isles numbered only a few hundred thousand). For this reason you have to be very careful how you harvest wild foods, both to protect the environment and your own health:

- ◆ Don't strip the food resource bare – only pick a small amount from each stand in order to preserve the plant (especially important for annual plant species where removing all the flowers or seeds in one year will largely eliminate the population in the following few years);
- ◆ Don't keep picking from the same areas – try and vary the location in order to lessen your impacts (this is especially important near the urban fringe where others might be picking too);
- ◆ Don't pick from protected areas such as wildlife reserves, sites of special scientific interest (SSSI) etc. – some of the endangered species that are protected on that site may be dependent upon the same food plants that you pick!
- ◆ Yanking stalks from plants can damage them and encourage disease (especially perennials and shrubs) – if possible use a knife to cut the stems (see the later section on 'knives');
- ◆ If you can't clearly and unequivocally identify something, don't eat it – there are a number of edible plants that look similar to inedible or toxic species (e.g., cow parsley and fool's parsley);
- ◆ Always consider potential hazards, not just physical (e.g. falling in a ditch/river or cuts from thorns) but also pollution – this is especially true in urban areas where historic land uses and more recent fly tipping can contaminate land, but even in rural areas agricultural run-off, road run-off and waste dumping can give rise to toxic contamination;
- ◆ For many common wild foods (a.k.a. "weeds") you can easily take a few plants or seeds and sow them in your own garden where they may also grow easily (perhaps as, if not more, easily than many domesticated/cultivated species) – this will reduce your impact on the countryside.

types of survival programmes) we learn to take from nature without necessarily understanding the relationships between plants, the environment and the sustainable use of those resources – in this sense wild food is just something you do for a day out. Instead we'd recommend that you concentrate on integrating wild foods into your everyday diet by understanding how they grow, the seasons for different wild foods, and the use of additional skills such as preserving (e.g. jam making) to make the short wild food season stretch to a larger part of the year.

To get the most from wild foods we have to develop an understanding of the ecology of the countryside and how that influences what's available, but also the historic relationship of rural communities to wild foods in order to understand what we can do with them (similar to the approach of Ray Mears and other ethno-botanists who try to understand how humans have historically used plants as a sustainable resource).

Learning to forage

Developing ways to integrate wild foods into your life is a process of learning – in turn that means committing time to go out into the countryside, learning to identify plants at different stages of the growing season, and learning the various methods to cook and preserve the produce that you harvest.

We've broken down this process into four steps:

Step 1. Pick your foraging area(s)

The first thing to do is pick an area. That requires that you have access to the countryside (see section 2). You can forage in many cities and towns but this can be fraught with difficulties: many open spaces in towns may have been subject to previous contaminating land uses (or why would the area not have been developed already!) or they might be fly-tipped; the deposition of pollutants from nearby industrial processes might create problems of contamination; and in urban areas the management of open spaces by local authorities is often, to save money, based upon chemicals. Looking at old maps in the local library will tell you about previous polluting land uses, and the local council will have information about any noxious processes in your area at the present (from the council's 'pollution control register').

In order to develop your knowledge of plants you'll need to have easy, regular access to the area in order to 'live with it' – getting to know/understand the diversity of different plants and fruits over the year and being able to get there at just the right time to harvest them. The best way to do this is to incorporate it into some form of regular recreation – going for walks, exercise, or just walking the dog.

The diversity of plants is governed by existing land uses – especially agriculture, since some plants (especially annual 'weeds') may have been sprayed out of existence – and the geology or soil type of the area. The soil type influences the acidity of the soil and certain plants will only grow where the soil is acid or alkaline, or in the case of a number of species that hug the coast, salty. Some plants love wet or boggy ground, whilst others will only grow in well

drained soil. The reason for this variation is the ecology of plants – in order to thrive certain plants have developed preferences that give them advantages in certain ecological niches this allow them to grow faster than the other plants around them.

In order to manage your impact on the land you need to forage over as large an area as possible – and better still, on more than one site. With experience you might find that you forage on more than one area in order to source different types of plant – e.g., a woodland area, hedgerows, grasslands and by waterways. As you develop your knowledge you can also forage in these different environments in order to get a regular supply of something edible over the course of the year.

Step 2. Over a year or two walk your foraging area regularly and try to identify as much as you can

Books give pictures of lovely flowering plants, but as the flowering season might only be a few weeks often when you come across these plants they won't be in flower. To understand which plant is which you need to be able to see it at different stages in its life-cycle, and to do that you have to go out regularly. This might sound a chore but it's extremely good for you. It's not just about getting regular exercise, but having regular contact with wild places is good psychologically (*Google/Wikipedia* the word 'biophilia').

To forage from the land you will of course need to have legal access otherwise you will be committing the civil offence of 'trespass'. There are four ways to access the land legally:

- ◆ *Roads*. This brings with it the problem of contamination from the road (e.g., the benzene from the exhaust or heavy metals from the wearing tyres) and for this reason quiet back roads are far better (and safer) than major roads.
- ◆ *Public rights of way*. The Ordnance Survey map – the orange 1:25,000 scale is the best – shows public rights of way that you can walk to access the countryside. Any land/woodland the paths cross is fair game, but only those hedgerows that the path runs alongside are accessible.
- ◆ *Access land*. Certain areas, either by agreement or because they're common land, have been opened up for the public to roam across them. These areas are shown on the orange 1:25,000 scale Ordnance Survey maps as a beige shading with an orange/brown shaded boundary. But, legally, if you pick wild foods on access land you lose your rights of access and you are once again trespassing on private property.
- ◆ *Get permission* (if you know who owns it), in which case you're free to do what you like.

All nature reserves, be they local or legally protected sites of special scientific interest, should be avoided since, either by law or by the conditions of access, picking is usually not permitted. Public parks are technically open to the public, although you may not want to pick anything there because of the tendency for these areas to be regularly sprayed.

Step 3. Gradually begin to collect wild foods

As you use books to develop your skills at identify-

ing plants you'll be able to begin picking leaves and fruits, and even excavating roots. Due to the historical importance of wild foods *picking them is not a criminal offence*. Section 4, subsection 3, of the Theft Act 1968 makes it clear that –

A person who picks mushrooms growing wild on any land, or who picks flowers, fruit or foliage from a plant growing wild on any land, does not (although not in possession of the land) steal what he picks unless he does it for reward or for sale or other commercial purpose. For the purpose of this subsection 'mushroom' includes any fungus, and 'plant' includes any shrub or tree.

Whilst *picking* may not be theft, it might be theft if you *uproot* a tree or shrub and take it away (certain roots, like dandelion or burdock are a grey area since as 'weeds' they have no economic value). The exception is of course plants which are protected or endangered species – these are protected under the *Wildlife and Countryside Act* (section 13/Schedule 8) and other regulations (you can get a list from your local library, or on-line, but most wild food guides will tell you whether the species is protected). Damaging these plants is a criminal offence. Also, unlike plants, all wild animals are someone's property, and taking them is technically poaching (but there is a grey area relating to finding an animal that's died without being trapped or shot – e.g. road kill).

The reason that you need to observe plants over their whole growing cycle is that most identification books show them in flower – at which point there is often little doubt about identifying them. By watching the plants grow and then identifying them for certain when they flower you'll be able to identify them with greater certainty at any time of the year. However, the golden rule of foraging still applies – **if you don't know what it is, don't eat it!**

A note about knives

As noted earlier, when harvesting foods it's far better to cut the plant because it causes less damage, and you might also want to cut/peel and eat it on the spot. This of course necessitates carrying a knife which, in the current media panics about knife crime, is not a popular activity. Contrary to the view portrayed by the media it is not against the law to carry a knife provided that it conforms to certain restrictions. Section 139 of the *Criminal Justice Act 1988* makes it legal to carry a folding pen knife with a cutting blade no longer than three inches. Generally the following restrictions apply: no knife can be carried on any school premises (*Offensive Weapons Act 1996*); it must not be an 'automatic' or 'gravity' opened flick or butterfly knife (*Offensive Weapons Act 1959*); and it must not be disguised as something innocent (*Criminal Justice Act 1988*). Note that any knife which is not banned or has a blade longer than

Common wild foods and their uses

Beech

An individual beech tree produces nuts every third year – nuts are edible, and can be pressed for oil.

Blackberry

The most popular hedgerow fruit, widespread in most hedges. Good raw, nice cooked with apple, wonderful made into jam.

Cherry

Berries can be eaten raw or made into jams/preserves (if you can get them before the birds!).

Chickweed

A common garden weed, it's one of the best wild green salads. It is also one of the few leafy foods available in the Autumn and early Spring.

Cleavers/goosegrass

The very young shoots are spicy, like rocket, but as they get older they become fibrous and need to be cooked.

Dandelion

Young dandelion leaves can be eaten as salad, but older leaves can be bitter and need to be cooked. The roots, towards the end of the year when they are large, can be harvested and boiled or roasted – but sometimes they can be rather bitter. If roasted until dry it can be ground to make a coffee substitute.

Dog rose/wild rose

Dog/wild rose flowers can be turned into rose petal jam (spreadable Turkish delight!). Dried they make an aromatic tea. Rosehips can be processed to make a syrup or jelly.

Elder

A common hedge shrub. The flowers can be used to flavour cakes, to make cordial or cooked in batter to make fritter (but you have to separate the tasty flower from the bitter green stem!). The berries can be turned into fruit jelly, or eaten raw, but don't eat too much as they have a laxative effect.

Fat hen

A garden weed that can be eaten/used like spinach.

Hawthorn

The leaf shoots, just after opening (before they toughen up) can be eaten raw. The berries can be eaten, but you must separate (or just spit) the stone out because it contains cyanide.

Hazel

Only the larger hazel trees produce nuts. Nuts can be eaten raw, but taste better roasted (in the shell).

Hedge garlic/jack-by-the-hedge

Found in hedges in the spring, the leaves can be eaten in salads.

Lime

Although difficult to collect from such a large tree, the flowers can be dried to make a herbal tea.

Nettle

A ubiquitous weed, but one with high levels of vitamin C, iron and protein! Young shoots can be eaten after wilting over a flame or steaming/boiling water. Older leaves must be boiled and sieved to extract the nutritious pulp. Dried the leaves also can be used to make tea.

Ramsons/wild garlic

Easy to find in wet and boggy woodland. The leaves have a mild onion/garlic flavour and can be eaten raw. The bulbs taste like shallots and can be eaten raw (beware! – don't confuse with the bulbs of poisonous bluebell and other species that grow in similar conditions)

Silverweed

A widespread weed, the roots were once commonly eaten like potato/parsnip.

Sweet chestnut

Not as popular a tree as the inedible horse chestnut tree so it is hard to find. The nuts are large and mostly made of carbohydrate, not protein – good roasted or raw, and can be ground into nut flour.

three inches (e.g., a hunting knife) can still be carried in public but you must have a good lawful reason for doing so (section 139, *Criminal Justice Act 1988*).

Step 4. Learn to cook at home in order to develop preserving skills

Many wild foods can be eaten raw – which, if you take a hunk of (own-made!) bread makes a wonderful picnic. Others need to be cooked. For example, young nettles need to be heated (over a flame or in boiling water) to neutralise the sting, but later in the season they have to be boiled in order to extract the edible pulp from the indigestible fibre.

Most wild food books give details on preparation, but to get real value from wild foods you need to preserve them to make them last for longer periods:

- ◆ the obvious option is jam making, but many berries can also be preserved in syrup (and if you keep your old jam/honey jars you can reuse them at no cost, and it's better than recycling!);
- ◆ many berries and leaves can be frozen, or better still you can make raw fruit pies and then freeze them as an 'oven ready' meal;
- ◆ certain wild foods (e.g. the bulbs of ramsons) can be pickled like onions, or made into pickles/chutneys to extend their shelf life; and
- ◆ many leaves, berries, some mushrooms, and most wild herbs, can be hung and dried to extend their storage life (once dried, it's a good idea to seal them in a jar to make them last longer), or to make herbal teas.

There are many good books on home preserving, jam and freezing, so we won't add any more detail.

What to look for

There are no hard and fast rules on what to pick because each area, and the environments in those areas (hedgerows, grasslands and waterways) are different. There are certain things which are ubiquitous, such as nettles, dandelions and elder. The other less obvious species listed in the many wild food books have to be sought out. The table on the previous page gives some ideas.

It's best to begin with the really simple things that don't require any extra effort to consume – edible leaves, berries and nuts. As you progress and find more things to eat you'll probably get into cooking, especially the common foods that require cooking (nettles) or roasting (dandelion roots).

How far you go depends entirely on your own preference. If you just want to pick blackberries and make jam, that's fine. The important point is this; for the average person you cannot sustain your entire diet from wild food. Wild food produces nutrients at a lower cropping density than agriculture, so it's impractical to think that we could sustain ourselves from wild food. What wild food can do is add diversity and practical fun to our diet. At the most basic level, wild food is a link we can use to understand and have a relationship with nature.

Bibliography

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