

A
FALCON
GUIDE™

FORAGING WILD EDIBLE PLANTS OF NORTH AMERICA

More than 200 Delicious Recipes Using Nature's Edibles

A FIELD GUIDE



CHRISTOPHER NYERGES



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More than 150 Delicious Recipes Using Nature's Edibles

Christopher Nyerges

FALCONGUIDES

GUILFORD, CONNECTICUT
HELENA, MONTANA

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Information available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nyerges, Christopher, author.

Foraging wild edible plants of North America : more than 150 delicious recipes using nature's edibles / Christopher Nyerges.

pages cm

Includes index.


ISBN 978-1-4930-0518-5 (pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-4930-1499-6 (e-book)

1. Cooking (Wild foods) 2. Natural food. 3. Wild plants, Edible—North America. 4. Wild plants, Edible—Folklore. I. Title.

TX369.N94 2016

641.3'02—dc23

2015036854

 The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

*To all those who provide sustenance
instead of merely making meals
this book is dedicated.*

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WHY THIS BOOK?

This book was conceived with the idea of including wild greens that are more or less “everywhere” in the United States. A few are natives of the West or the East, but most are imports from Europe and elsewhere. The common weeds are the ubiquitous inhabitants of vacant lots, plowed fields, edges of farmland, backyards, etc. Most are widely distributed, and most of the plants within this book can be found by anyone in most parts of North America, especially the United States. There are a few exceptions to this, and we’ll tell you about them when you read the properties of each plant. Greens are not sufficient to keep you alive by themselves, but they provide the vitamins and minerals that your body needs. Greens liven up soups, salads, and MRE dishes, and anything made from dehydrated or stored foods. Greens are the staff of life, and they can be included in any recipe that calls for spinach, watercress, or lettuce. Yes, some have distinct flavors and textures, and yes, some may require some getting used to. But in general, the plants that we profile here, and the recipes we provide, are an easy way to get started with regularly using wild foods and introducing them into your family’s diet.



AN INTRODUCTION TO WILD PLANTS

Before agriculture and the tilling of the soil, we hunted and foraged for wild plants. Collecting wild plants for our meals was second nature; it was just as “normal” as modern people opening the refrigerator door.

As specific plants became favored, we began to centralize, manipulate, and domesticate these wild plants near our living areas. It has been speculated that agriculture began unintentionally when early man observed that certain plants grew in and around the community’s manure piles. The hardy survivor plants were those whose seeds passed through the human body and still sprouted and grew.

In any event, it was certainly more convenient to have these hardier food plants growing near the community where they could be easily harvested. The gradual selection and domestication of a certain few groups of plants eventually allowed civilizations to flourish and flower.

And while mankind was able to devote more time to crafts and arts, the “wild ones” were increasingly ignored.

But they were not forgotten! The knowledge, use, and lore of wild plants have been kept alive not just by Indian historians and botanists but by all the peoples everywhere who have suffered hard times. During such hard times, those who have retained the knowledge of the old ways know that whenever their society failed them, they could turn to the earth to provide simple, and usually adequate, sustenance.

North American Indians collected and used wild plants as a regular, day-to-day activity. It was a part of life. Until relatively recent centuries, the Indians fully utilized the gifts of nature. They freely shared their hard-earned knowledge with the European colonists, and many colonists owed their very survival to these indigenous people. (And how was the favor repaid?)

The manner in which the indigenous California people practiced “agriculture” with wild plants has been well documented in the book *Tending the Wild* by M. Kat Anderson. Many of these practices were practiced widely, not just in California, such as the use of fire, digging sticks, pruning, etc., so that wild plants produced reliably. It was an intensive, complex combination of ways of dealing with the land on a large scale that was the rival of modern agriculture.

Wild foods have been used during wartime when normal food production is curtailed or focused on military needs. During a war or an economic depression, when diet may be dictated by food lines and ration coupons, wild foods are a welcome supplement.

I’ve spoken with many people whose survival during World War II was partially dependent on their ability to gather local wild foods. As one German



One of the taller species of nettle

woman told me, “Yes, we were as thin as sticks. There was no food! But the cattail, nettles, and other wild plants kept us alive. That’s all there was!”

When food is abundant, we tend to forget the harsh realities that visit us periodically and predictably. In our myopia during these times of plenty, we pave over the food-producing areas, cut down the food-producing trees in favor of pointless ornamentals, and vigorously poison our lawns and gardens to kill off the last dandelion and chickweed in the name of order and beauty. How sad that so many of us have chosen to ignore our roots!

Hoboes have romanticized the lifestyle of the traveling man, free from the restrictions of the dominant society. The hobo, although usually seen as a bum, loafer, freeloader, alcoholic, and generally a burden on society, was also romantically seen as a member of the loose brotherhood of wandering nomads. The life of the hobo, whether chosen or a matter of circumstance, was hard but generally self-reliant. The hobo found his food in an orchard, in a breadline, in a trashcan, as barter for work, and of course, from all the freely growing weeds, shrubs, and trees from coast to coast, from border to border and beyond. To survive, the hobo utilized *all* the “free” resources available to him. (And yes, I am well aware that such vagabonds are not generally liked by most members of society.)

And don't forget the contribution that unemployment and poverty have made to keeping the knowledge of wild food plants alive. When that check stops coming in, wild foods can be used to fill the gap.

One morning I sat with a friend on the front steps of his home. He had been laid off his job a few weeks earlier and, barely able to pay the rent, he just didn't have any money to buy food. He was hungry, he told me, and hadn't eaten much in three days. I asked him if he was using the food from his yard. His response was great laughter, not as ridicule, but as he put it, because he needed "real food."

"Let's look around," I suggested. We walked around his yard gathering edible plants. It was spring and the yard was abundant with young weeds, since he never bothered to mow the lawn and pull weeds. We collected enough wild foods to make a large salad and several cooked vegetables. We even picked fresh guava fruits from the backyard ornamental tree that my friend didn't know was there. The salad was simple but alive. The greens and vegetables, steamed and buttered, were vibrant and delicious. The fruits were sweet, like manna from heaven.

My friend was surprised that all this was in his small urban backyard. Now he saw that the weeds in his yard were valuable resources. They were not just bothersome growths that had to be pulled up and thrown away. Instead of token substitutes for "real food," my friend saw that these plants of the earth were, indeed, real food.

Campers and hunters have also traditionally kept alive the lore of plant foods. These plants helped to keep the pack light when hiking. They could also be relied upon if one became lost or stranded.

But let's not see these wild plants as only "food as a last resort" when you're in a survival situation. That is too limited a viewpoint. Wild plants are a resource that we should get to know and appreciate on a day-to-day basis. Include them in your meals today. Why wait for tomorrow?

Wild foods, for most of us during "normal" times, will usually not play the dominant or primary role in our diet. But do consider some of the advantages of including them in your daily meals, along with fresh garden produce and store-bought foods. No fresher salad can be made than one that is gathered minutes before dinner. Fresh, green, leafy, wild salad plants are the most nutritious and healthful, not having been subjected to commercial fertilizers, pesticides, or long storage periods.

Wild foods are often useful substitutes or extenders of other food items. However, most of their flavors, textures, and aromas are unique, therefore these plants should be considered valid foods themselves, not only as "substitutes."

Another important reason to use wild plants is that this practice keeps us constantly alert to the fact that the earth does provide for all its inhabitants. Our modern, man-made system of food production and distribution "works" but is ever subject to manipulation and disruption by a variety of political and



Prepared wild salad, consisting of chickweed, mustard, sow thistle, and lamb's-quarters greens

economic factors. Furthermore, as more and more of us depend on big agriculture for our food, fewer and fewer farmers are doing the actual work, and the land is plowed and denuded and sprayed with pesticides in the name of “food production.” If you want greater clarity in wrapping your mind around what we do to the land in the name of agriculture, take the time to read *One Straw Revolution* by Masanobu Fukuoka. It’s a real eye-opener.

Using wild food plants not only has immediate value but also keeps us prepared for possible crises that may affect our food supply.

Often wild foods affect our body differently from either garden or store-bought foods. Using wild foods on a regular basis, combined with our other food items, keeps the body attuned to these more basic foods. Should we suddenly be forced to subsist largely on wild plants, our bodies will be somewhat adjusted. Also remember, many people have remained hungry, malnourished, and have even died when wild foods were abundant. They simply could not “stomach” such foods—at least they believed they couldn’t. A prejudiced viewpoint can ultimately be our greatest enemy.

Wild Food Outings and Workshops

I have taught thousands of city dwellers that wild foods abound not only in faraway green pastures but right in alleys, vacant lots, and backyards. Since I started teaching in 1974 under the encouragement of the nonprofit WTI, I've taken many groups of people on weekend outings to identify the locally growing plants. We've always been able to make at least a salad and tea from whatever we've found on our short excursions. Sampling a few wild plants in delicious recipes, right then and there, has been a valuable experience for all the attendees of the outings. For many, the knowledge of wild foods had been strictly intellectual up to that point. Now they were actually tasting and drinking, discovering new flavors and monitoring different body reactions. Not only has this had a dramatic personal impact on all the outing participants, but it has also added a more realistic dimension to any discussion of "how the Indians lived."

During special wild food workshops, we've made full meals, letting the participants do most of the work so they can get a feel for actually working with these plants. These workshops are conducted at a park, a public building, or at someone's home. We usually collect many of the ingredients for our meal that day, with the participants doing the actual gathering. We don't "plan" a particular menu but let whatever is in season do the planning. That way, the entire experience for the participants is much more real, not artificial.

Once we've collected everything that we'll be using for any given workshop, we lay out the plants on tables. Participants will begin cleaning and preparing the plants, under supervision. Others will work on getting a fire started and developing a good bed of coals.

Often prickly pear cactus pads will be peeled and diced and someone will begin sautéing them. This will become a delicious prickly pear omelet once the cactus is cooked and onions and eggs are added. It is served with a dash of hot sauce. A cactus, onion, and tomato stew can also be cooked.



A student prepares a wild salad.



Christopher, right, shows how to identify wild foods. PHOTO BY RICK ADAMS

Watercress soup will be made by finely chopping the greens and letting them simmer in a pot of milk. Seasoned with paprika, this is a grand soup for any occasion.

At these wild food workshops we always make a salad and several steamed greens. We'll make tea from sage, bay, mormon tea, mint, and whatever else may be available.

Our usual bread is acorn bread. Acorns require a thorough leaching before using the flour for bread, so I've usually brought shelled, leached, and dried acorns to the workshops to save time. In some cases when we've allocated more time, I've brought raw acorns and let the participants peel them and begin boiling and leaching them, so the students see the entire process from beginning to end. (Note: the complete leaching process for acorns is discussed in detail in my *Foraging California* and *Guide to Wild Foods and Useful Plants* books.)

The leached acorns are ground to a flour and then used in bread or pancake batter. The bread can be baked in a solar oven or in a covered pan over the coals of a fire. The pancakes are cooked on a buttered cast-iron skillet.

Boiled cattail spikes (eaten like corn on the cob) are a tasty addition to our workshop meals when in season, as are all the other edible parts of the cattail.

For dessert, we have teas and various wild fruits such as prickly pear cactus, carob pods, currants, and whatever other fruits are in season. Occasionally we'll make prickly pear cactus fruit ice cream, carob brownies, currant jam, and so on.

We don't usually prepare any meat items during our workshops. Our protein is usually derived from milk, cheese, and eggs added to the wild ingredients. Sometimes, however, we've tested such delicacies as snails (or should we say escargot), worms, grasshoppers, termite larvae, rattlesnake, and other unconventional but nevertheless viable "meat" sources.

ABOUT THE RECIPES

Many of the recipes in this book can be adapted and changed to fit whatever is in season or available wherever you happen to be. Don't feel restricted. Experiment. Try new variations and combinations.

The recipes in this book are generally very simple. In most of the recipes, wild foods are the dominant ingredients. This is so you can experience and get to know each particular plant. It isn't to suggest that there is anything wrong with not using wild foods as the main ingredients—but you do need to know each plant well before you can determine how to best use it and how not to use it.

Never forget that regardless of how complicated a recipe you might develop, all of these wild food plants can usually be enjoyed simply raw or steamed if circumstances dictate simplicity. In fact, most wild foods are at their best unadorned and uncluttered. See these wild plants as the wonderful foods they are—simple, direct, primal.

You may come to realize that modern man is missing this gift of the earth by our almost exclusive preference for the pampered foods of hybridization. As you slowly chew, let these plants that have nurtured bygone civilizations nurture you. Let the full implications of the bounty all around become readily apparent to you, and welcome the “weeds” as your allies and friends.



Nasturtium flowers in a kitchen garden

WHAT TO CARRY WHEN HIKING

The addition of a few items and ingredients to your daypack will enable you to make delicious salads or vegetable dishes at day's end.

Utensils

I've often carried along a small salad bowl to make salad production more convenient. However, if you need to save weight and space, just use a sturdy plastic bag. It folds down small and weighs little. When you're ready to make a salad, simply open the bag, fold the edges over, and add the various ingredients. Tossing the salad is easy—just close the bag and shake. And I must admit, I often carry a jar of salad dressing, usually just an oil and vinegar mix.

For a cooking pot, I use a small stainless steel pot, a small cast-iron skillet or pot, or an enamelware pot. Aluminum is lightweight and inexpensive and ubiquitous at the camping supply stores. However, aluminum is toxic to the body and it readily leaches both acids and alkalies. The aluminum industry still states that aluminum poisoning is an old wives' tale, but there has been far too much data collected over the past hundred years to prove the contrary. (Yes, I'm aware that there's still debate and controversy over this one, but I've discussed the physiological effects of aluminum elsewhere, in my *Urban Wilderness* book,



Cooking in a hollowed-out yucca stalk is a way to cook in the bush when you don't even have a pot!

Peace Press, 1979. Still, I suggest that you avoid the use of aluminum in cooking utensils wherever possible.)

Incidentally, you can cook and boil water in a paper cup or a small birch bark cooking pot. Why doesn't the paper burn? The water in the cup keeps the temperature of the paper below the burning point. In a pinch this is a good fact to know. And on some of our outings, we've hollowed out the dried flowering stalk of the yucca plant, and after setting it on the ground horizontally, we'd fill it with water. We'd heat that water (or soup) by adding very hot rocks to the liquid using tongs.

Also don't forget hobo ingenuity. An old can, cleaned out and hung over a fire or straddled over two stones in the hot coals, serves as a fine cooking pot.

For eating utensils, carry small bowls, metal sierra cups, or, if need be, use a flat rock for a "dish." I carry small wooden bowls, which are lightweight and a pleasure to use.

I'd much rather eat with heavier and more rugged silverware fork and spoon than lightweight plastic utensils that break when you bend them wrong. If you insist on the lightweight plastic utensils, I'd suggest unbreakable Lexan forks and spoons.

But one needn't panic if there is no fork or spoon in your pack. Use chopsticks! I often carry a pair and they are easy for eating everything except soup. If you don't carry a pair along, make a pair. Cut two segments from a mature cattail stalk or two equal-length segments from any straight piece of nonpoisonous wood, such as mulefat. Soon you will discover that the woods are full of chopsticks.

Condiments

For seasoning the wild food dishes that you collect along the trail, there are a few simple, lightweight items that really make the meal more enjoyable. I often carry oil and vinegar in my pack in separate containers. This way I can use just the oil for frying or sautéing, and I can still combine the oil and vinegar when needed for salad dressing.

The oil and vinegar can be carried in any waterproof container. I've used plastic 35mm film containers (though you hardly see them anymore) and old vitamin pill containers, and these work quite well. Small glass or plastic spice and pill bottles are also useful containers, but be careful with glass.

To season both salad and cooked greens, I often carry along a few containers of spices, sometimes all mixed together. These include salt, pepper, kelp, dill weed, paprika, garlic powder, marjoram, etc. Powdered miso is another great addition to your pack.

Jim Robertson from Culver City, California, explained to me how he makes a spice from the laurel sumac plant (*Rhus laurina*), which is common and widespread in the chaparral regions of Southern California.



Pascal Baudar grinds up mustard flowers to make his unique mustard spice.

First, he harvests clusters of the berries at their peak of ripeness. Then he dries them in his dehydrator, though you could use the sun also. Robertson emphasizes that you should be sure they are very dry, and then you grind the berries into as fine a powder as possible. He uses his mortar and pestle for this process. That's it!

According to Robertson, "I sprinkle on eggs, vegetables, etc. along with other seasonings. I like the unique mildly bitter flavor that it adds to my food, along with the fact that I'm eating yet another local, vital, native wild food. This is a very nice connection with my environment."

Salt Substitutes

Salt makes a great difference in the flavor, palatability, and enjoyment of many food dishes. If you don't have salt, or if you chose not to use it for health reasons, there are substitutes. The best salt substitute is seaweed. Seaweeds provide potassium chloride, instead of the sodium chloride that table salt provides. Virtually any fresh, non-rotting seaweed can be collected, dried, powdered, and used as you'd use salt. The flavor is similar, but milder, than regular salt.

No seaweed available? The leaves of all species of *Atriplex*, commonly called saltbush, can be dried, powdered, and used like salt. However, you need to experiment because some species are better than others. Sometimes the dried leaves of saltbush are burned and the ashes used like salt. (Which method is better?



A view of Australian saltbush leaves, which can be used as a salt substitute

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