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Backyard Foraging

*"Suddenly, a walk through
the garden becomes a
treasure hunt."*

Daniel Klein chef, film producer,
and founder of The Perennial Plate

Ellen Zachos



65 Familiar Plants You Didn't Know You Could Eat



Dogwood



Rose



Oak



Juniper



Daylily

INTRODUCTION

"But how do you know it's safe?"

Jacob was not about to accept my offer of ripe Juneberries without a little more information. We were hiking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, miles away from the nearest grocery store, and as far as my nephew was concerned, the woods were not for eating. I showed him the five-pointed crown on the top of the berry, and explained that any berry with that feature was safe to eat. I showed him the tree it came from (an *Amelanchier* species) and its characteristic smooth gray bark and oval leaves. I cut open a berry with my fingernail to show him the small seeds dispersed throughout. Finally, I ate a few of the berries myself.

When I didn't immediately keel over or grab my stomach in anguish, Jacob decided to trust me, but he was right to ask questions. The first rule of foraging is never, ever, eat anything you're not 100 percent sure of. This applies whether



Ripe Juneberries are a juicy treat found in yards, parks, and woodlands.

you're picking in the wild or in your own backyard.

"Foraging in your own backyard!" you say. "I thought you had to wander the fields and woods to forage." Nope. Truth is, many of our favorite garden plants have edible parts that have simply been overlooked. And since many of us already know what we're growing in our own backyards, identification there is a lot easier than it would be in the wild. It's a great way to

start foraging and to introduce new edible plants to your menu.

This book presents familiar ornamental plants and weeds with a secret: they just happen to be delicious. Each plant has its own profile, with information on how it grows, how to harvest it while preserving its ornamental value (or how to control its weediness), and how to best use it in the kitchen. You'll see plants in the

landscape, in close-up, and as food.

But wait, there's more! By going one step further and actually planting your garden with edible ornamentals, you can make the most out of your space, even if it's very small.

Historically, gardeners have considered ornamental plants (trees, shrubs, vines, perennials, and annuals) as separate from edible plants (fruits, vegetables, and herbs) and have planted them in different locations. Do you have the time and energy to plant separate kitchen and ornamental gardens, replete with stylish tuteurs and weeded paths? Do you have enough space to plant two different kinds of gardens? I don't.

I look at ornamental plants with edible parts as the superheroes of the modern garden. They feed body and soul (with their deliciousness and beauty, respectively) and cut back on gardening chores by letting you focus your precious time on a single space.

"But," you argue, "a quick trip to the supermarket is

so fast and easy, why take time to walk around the backyard, looking for food?" Because it's there. Because it's free. And because it's fun. The thrill of discovery (*you can eat that?*) is intoxicating!

Let's walk around the neighborhood. I'll show you the best leaves for salad and the tastiest berries to snack on. Deliciousness is key. This is not a field guide or a survival manual. Sure, it's fun to imagine which wild plants you might live on if you got lost in the woods, but if this stuff weren't tasty, I wouldn't be interested. I'm not sure why today's gardener has forgotten that daylily buds and milkweed pods are astonishingly delicious, but it's time to get reacquainted with these excellent vegetables.

What if you don't have your own garden? Don't despair! Perhaps you have friendly neighbors who'd be happy to have a jar of Oregon grape jelly in exchange for letting you forage in their backyard. Whenever you're foraging on private property, be

sure you ask permission first, even if you're only removing the occasional dandelion. It's also possible to forage in public places when you know the rules. For example, the National Park Service allows individuals to pick up to 25 pounds of pine nuts per year, as long as they're for noncommercial use and no trees are damaged in the picking. While most parks don't allow wholesale harvesting of leaves and stems, they're more relaxed about nuts and berries. Collecting mushrooms and weeds may also be permitted; just be sure to ask first.

Which brings me back to the ease and elegance of *backyard foraging*. You've already got permission, and you probably know what you're growing. So let's get started!

Wild foods, nontraditional edibles, foraged foods — whatever you call them, these comestibles have much to recommend them. Sure, backyard foraging reduces your carbon footprint, but the key reason for eating these plants is that they taste great. Their surprising flavors, unusual textures, fresh colors, and nutritional value can liven up your cooking, or offer convenient snacking right from your own backyard.

Different landscapes produce different plants. Take a look around and assess your surroundings. Where are you? What do you see?

Are you standing on a mowed lawn?
Get down on your hands and knees to look for sheep sorrel, chickweed, dandelion, and pineapple weed.

Is there a meadow behind your house?
Poke around in the high grasses to look for milkweed, wild garlic, and oxeye daisies, and check the meadow's edges for silverberry, sweetfern, chestnut, and black walnut.

Are you sitting pretty on a few wooded acres?
Look for spicebush, Juneberry, garlic mustard, wild ginger, ostrich fern, miner's lettuce, wintergreen, mayapple, sassafras, or California bay.

Automobile pollution can be absorbed by roadside plants, so watch where you pick.



Are you near a stream, river, or lake?

Look for hopniss, chokeberry, or Japanese knotweed.

Are you looking at a vacant lot that's weedy and overgrown?

This could be the perfect place for sumac, purslane, or Japanese knotweed.

In an urban park you might find garlic mustard, milkweed, miner's lettuce, ginkgo nuts, daylilies, dandelions, and elderberries.

Ensuring Safety

Wherever your food comes from, you want to know that it's clean and healthy. If you buy an apple at the grocery store, you probably wash it before taking a bite. You trust that the land where it grew was safe for farming — i.e., not contaminated with waste or heavy metals. If it's an organic apple, you know that whoever grew it didn't spray the fruit with anything toxic or harmful. These same concerns and questions apply to foraging.

In Your Backyard

You should know what's been sprayed on your own plants, in your own backyard. Do you use weed killers to produce a prize-winning lawn? Maybe you've sprayed an insecticide to keep aphids off your roses. You need to look closely at the labels of any product you've applied to see if it's toxic. If it is, you'll need to do a little research to determine if and when you can safely eat something that's been sprayed.

In Public Places

If you're harvesting in a park (with permission, of course), you should inquire about its spraying policy. Often, rural parks have a no-spray policy, preferring to let nature reign supreme. City parks may spray, but they generally post signs immediately before and after, explaining which chemicals have been used and where. If your yard is adjacent to a park, a golf course, agricultural fields, or timber property, it



A FEW REMINDERS

Remember these points, and you should be able to forage safely, within the law, and without ticking off the neighbors:

- Be 100 percent certain of what you're picking. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. And again. And again.
- Avoid foraging from ground polluted by pesticides, insecticides, animals, automobiles, or manufacturing.
- Try every new food in moderation.
- Don't overharvest.
- If you're foraging on land you don't own, ask permission of private property owners and learn the relevant rules about picking on public land.

may be susceptible to drift from herbicides and insecticides.

High-traffic roadsides and parking lots aren't the best places to harvest edibles. Pollutants from automobile exhaust can be absorbed from both the air and soil by plant roots and leaves. These can't be washed away or cooked out of the plant. How far from the road it is safe to harvest depends on the terrain, how busy the road is, and what you're picking. Here are a few tips:

- Give yourself a distance of 100 feet from a well-traveled road or highway. If it's a quiet gravel road in the countryside, 15 or 20 feet should suffice.
- Land uphill from a road is less likely to be contaminated by exhaust than land that is the same distance downhill from the road. As particles settle out of exhaust and fall to the ground, they tend to move downhill, not up.
- Animal waste may be a problem in yards, parks, and city tree pits (those mini-gardens that surround city trees), but this can be washed away, unlike heavy metals that might be absorbed by plant roots.
- Root crops are most likely to contain soil contaminants because they are storage organs. They store nutrition for the plant (and inadvertently for us), and toxins may also be stored in their tissues.

Allergy Awareness

The first time you try *any* new food, whether it's foraged from your backyard or picked from the produce bins at Whole Foods, try a small amount. This way, if you meet up with a food that doesn't agree with you or discover an actual allergy, the reaction will be minimized. A taste of something may be disagreeable, but a plateful might send you to the emergency room. If you *know* you have food allergies, it's a good idea to avoid eating plants closely related to the allergens. For example, sumac is in the same family (Anacardiaceae) as mangoes and cashews, and thus may provoke a similar allergic reaction. Wintergreen contains methyl salicylate, which is closely related to salicylic acid, the main ingredient in aspirin. If aspirin doesn't agree with you, go easy on the wintergreen.

Ethical Harvesting

When harvesting, please consider the welfare of the plant in addition to your own well-being. Unless you're picking weeds, don't overharvest. This means different things for different plants. If you're picking fiddleheads, you should never take more than three from each fern. Overpicking leaves the plant too weak to thrive. If you're pinching the top leaves off an invasive chameleon plant, you can pretty much go to town. Abundant berries and nuts are hard to resist, but do leave some behind for the birds. With root crops, be sure to leave enough to sprout the following year.



Masses of miner's lettuce blanket this San Francisco hillside. Who's going to miss a few leaves?



FORAGING QUIZ

Now that you have a general operating procedure, take a look around your neighborhood at a few potential foraging spots. Should you harvest from these places?

The spot: A perfectly groomed public rose garden with nary a black spot or yellow leaf.

A: Just walk away.

The spot: A path to the beach, lined with wild roses that are full of plump, ripe, red rose hips.

A: Ask permission first, but these are probably okay to harvest.

The spot: Your neighbor's shade garden, which is bursting with fiddlehead ferns.

A: If the plants are plentiful, your neighbor may let you pick a few, but why not plant your own?

The spot: The lawn in Central Park, which is covered with stinky fallen ginkgo fruit.

A: Gather to your heart's content. Nuts that have fallen to the ground are generally fair game. And in this case, many people would consider it a public service!

The spot: Your knotweed-filled campsite near the Delaware River.

A: Harvest away!

When you grow tomatoes, you don't necessarily care what the plants look like as long as the fruit is juicy and sweet. Good thing, because tomato plants often look pretty beat by the end of the summer. But when you're eating your ornamental garden, appearances *do* matter. It's important to know how and when to harvest your food and still keep things looking pretty.

Each ornamental edible has an appropriate harvest time, just like traditional edibles. You wouldn't pick a peach when it's green and hard, and you shouldn't harvest your Juneberries while they're still red. Learning when to pick each edible will ensure you enjoy your harvest at its peak. The timing depends on what you're picking and how you plan to use it.

Picking Shoots and Young Foliage

When picking young shoots of plants like hostas, you should cut from around the outside of the clump, snipping new growth just above the soil line. As the remaining leaves unfurl, they'll cover the cut stems and the plant will look whole. The same technique can be applied to daylily shoots. Both hostas and daylilies produce enough shoots from a single crown that you can harvest up to 25 percent without weakening the plant or marring its appearance.

Some edible leaf crops should be picked after they have unfurled. If each leaf emerges from the ground on its own stem, cut the stem at soil level. If multiple leaves grow from a single stem, make your cut just above a leaf node (see image above).



A leaf node is the place on the stem of a plant from which a leaf emerges.

You don't want to leave leafless stems behind; it just doesn't look good. If the crop in question is a weed (garlic mustard, miner's lettuce, purslane), pick to your heart's content. If the leaves are highly ornamental, limit yourself to a taste that won't spoil your garden's appearance. Just as you might pinch the top few leaves off a coleus or basil plant to keep it neat and shapely, you can pick tender new leaves of nasturtium, Malabar spinach, or bee balm. You'll be grooming your plants and harvesting edibles at the same time.

A member of the mint family, bee balm sometimes spreads overenthusiastically. If this is the case in your garden, you can harvest by pulling up young shoots.

Foraging Flowers, Fruits, and Nuts

Flowers are tricky; pick too many and you'll reduce your fruit crop later in the growing season. If you're picking spring elderflowers for fritters or champagne, leave enough to be pollinated and provide berries in fall. Other flowers are produced so abundantly (and don't ripen into edible fruits) that they can be harvested in great number. Daylilies, lilacs, redbuds, and dandelions are good examples.

Fruit is often highly ornamental in addition to being delicious. Some plants produce so much fruit (like silverberries, spicebush, and crab apples) you can harvest as much as you want and still leave plenty on the shrubs to brighten up the landscape. Other plants produce a more limited crop and you'll want to pick it all; Juneberries, chokeberries, and Oregon grapes fall into this category. Enjoy the beauty of the fruit while it ripens and develops color, then harvest when it's at its peak. True, you

Oregon grapes are extremely sour but make an excellent jelly.



may miss the seductive clusters of deep purple elderberries hanging heavy on their branches, but when you're sipping elderberry wine or spreading elderberry jelly on toasted scones, the sacrifice will seem worthwhile.

Nuts are easy to harvest but difficult to process. They obligingly fall to the ground

when ripe, making gathering the crop a straightforward task. The post-harvest processing is where the work comes in; many nuts require shelling and curing before they can be eaten. But since nuts are especially tasty and highly nutritious, you may decide they're worth the extra work.



SAME AS STORE-BOUGHT?

What's the difference between a blueberry from the grocery store and a blueberry from a bush in your own backyard? No difference at all – and all the difference in the world.

No difference at all, because the shrubs that bear the fruit are the same species of shrub, producing the same species of fruit. All the difference in the world, because when you harvest your own fruit, it tastes better. But beyond the emotional preference of a devoted gardener or forager, there may be some actual, physical differences between the two fruits that explain why homegrown often tastes better.

Commercially raised fruits are regularly irrigated and fertilized. They are also harvested slightly before peak ripeness. Ripe fruit is softer and doesn't ship as well as slightly underripe fruit. Shipping underripe fruit means berries arrive in better condition and with a longer shelf life. But a berry that ripens on the shelf will never taste as good as a berry that ripens in the sun. Fruit picked from your backyard will be harvested at its peak:

sweet, soft, and bursting with flavor.

Additionally, berries grown with less than perfect irrigation and fertilization may be smaller and sweeter. I'm not suggesting that, if you're growing fruit, you should stress your fruit on purpose. Nor am I saying your irrigation and fertilization routines are imperfect. But if they are, take heart! Many growers believe that a little dryness at the right stage of berry development concentrates the flavor and makes for a tastier, albeit smaller, berry. But be careful; withholding moisture at the wrong stage of development may cause fruit to abort.

The truth is that many of the fruits, vegetables, herbs, nuts, and mushrooms we find on supermarket shelves are essentially the same as those we find in our backyards and neighborhood parks. The differences are subtle but important. Whether you taste the difference or not, I bet you'll enjoy eating the oyster mushroom you picked from the stump in your backyard a lot more than the oyster mushroom you picked from the produce bin at Whole Foods.

Digging Roots and Tubers

Root crops must be harvested with an eye toward preserving the plant population. You'll want to leave enough behind to ensure the plants come back the following year. Since many roots are harvested at the end of the growing season, collecting them can be part of your winter garden prep. Dig up the plant as if you're going to divide it, then remove a quarter to half of the tubers, bulbs, or stolons for consumption. How much you replant will depend on how fast the plant grows and how much of it you want in your garden next year.

Roots and tubers are best picked when their leaves and stems are not in active growth. This may be at the end of the growing season, when top growth is dormant and belowground tissue is plump and full after a season's worth of production and storage, or in early spring, before the plant has tapped the reserve nutrition stored in its belowground tissue. If the plant is in active growth, depleting that stored nutrition, your crop will be disappointing.

These dahlia tubers can be either planted or eaten. Raw they taste somewhat like radishes.



Timing for Taste

Gardeners watch their plants grow from young shoots to mature plants, through flowering, fruiting, and setting seed. They learn to recognize and appreciate the different stages of growth and understand what each plant needs as it moves through the growing season.

Foraging is the ultimate in seasonal eating, and following a plant through the seasons makes you a savvier forager. You can't wake up one October morning and decide you want to harvest mayapples . . . they won't be there! Nor will you be able to pick Japanese quince fruit in April. But you *can* appreciate the quince's flowers in spring, knowing that, come October, its fruit will be ready and ripe for the picking.

Stems and leafy greens are generally best eaten young, for several reasons. New,

Fiddleheads should be harvested when they're still tightly furled. These have passed their edible prime.



tender leaves and shoots may be eaten raw in early spring, but they require cooking later in the season when they develop stronger fibers in their foliage. The fibers don't make these leaves inedible, but they do make them a little tougher. The mature plant will be more palatable if it's chopped and cooked. Other leaf crops develop bitter compounds in the heat, drought, and full sun of summer. For example, both dandelions and garlic mustard may be slightly bitter in spring and fall, offering a nice sharpness when used with other raw greens in salads. In July or August those same plants are often too bitter to be eaten raw, unless they're grown in moist, shady conditions. Steaming or boiling removes some of the bitter compounds at this stage of growth. Lemon juice and olive oil improve the taste even further.

Fall fruits are often sweeter after a light frost, but they'll have more pectin (a natural jelling agent, crucial for jelly making) if you pick them early, slightly underripe. Of course the longer you leave fruit on the tree, the greater the chance that the birds or squirrels will beat you to them.

Ask yourself these questions before harvesting:

- How much of the plant can I pick and still have it look nice?
- When is the edible part at its most delicious?
- How do I want to prepare this food?

When you know the answers, it should be easy to have your garden and eat it, too.



WEATHER REPORT

Most people won't want to be outside, poking around in the garden in the middle of a rainstorm, but foraging after the rain is an excellent idea for several reasons.

If you're combining chores and want to harvest edible weeds from your garden, it's easier to pull them after a rain, when the soil is moist. In fact, if you haven't had rain, it's a good idea to run a sprinkler the night before you plan to weed, just to moisten the soil. Moist soil is more elastic and easier to work with. You'll also have a better chance of getting the whole root system out when it's flexible and full of moisture. Dry, brittle roots may break apart, leaving behind a piece that will continue to grow.

There's a difference between moist soil and wet soil. It's not a good idea to work in the garden when the soil is wet. (If you can pick up a clod of soil and squeeze water out of it, go back inside and cook something.) You risk compressing wet soil by walking or kneeling on it, and wet soil will cling to roots in large clods. If you've cultivated this soil, spending precious hours amending it with compost and TLC, you won't want to undo all that. The idea is to remove weeds, not soil, so wait until the soil has gone from wet to moist.

Mushrooms require lots of moisture to sprout; you won't find many during hot, dry weather, which is why fall is such a productive time for mushroom hunting. Plentiful autumn rains give fungi the moisture they need for rapid growth. A

few days after a good soaking rain is the perfect time to look for fresh mushrooms.

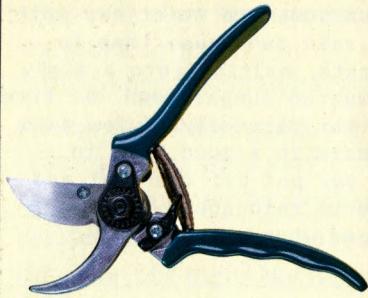
Once again, there's a fine line between just enough and too much. Fresh mushrooms are moist and soft; too much rain can cause them to disintegrate, melting into a mushy mass of wasted fungal flesh. So time your harvest carefully. A few days after a rain is a good time to look. If you put off the hunt and it starts to rain again, you may have missed your chance.

These hen-of-the-woods mushrooms grow quickly in moist fall weather.



Tools of the Trade

No matter what you're doing, it's important to have the right tool for the job; the right tool can turn a lengthy task into a quick project. Here's a list that will help simplify the harvest and preparation of your backyard buffet.



Bypass pruners

If you have a garden or do regular yard work, you probably already have a set of pruners. If you don't, and you're going shopping for a pair, make sure to buy bypass pruners instead of anvil pruners. Bypass pruners have one sharp blade that slides by another to make the cut, whereas anvil pruners have a single sharp blade that applies pressure against a flat, anvil-shaped surface. Anvil pruners require less hand strength, but they crush the stem of the plant being cut, so they aren't good for pruning stems or branches that you hope will continue to grow. If you're chopping up dead branches for the compost pile, anvil pruners are fine.



Garden fork

A garden fork is similar to a pitchfork but has more prongs (four instead of three) and a shorter handle. It's also slightly sturdier, intended for turning and sifting soil rather than lifting and tossing lightweight objects like hay. Garden forks are perfect for harvesting underground crops such as tubers. While you could use a spade to dig up your Jerusalem artichokes, canna, dahlias, or hopniss, a garden fork makes the task easier because you're not lifting out big shovelfuls of heavy soil. Push the tines into the soil and turn to break apart the earth, then reveal your crop. Also, there's less chance you'll cut a tuber in half with a garden fork than with a spade.

Transplant spade

A transplant spade is specially shaped for transplanting perennials, shrubs, and trees. You may still need to use a little muscle, depending on the job, but the long, narrow blade of the spade lets you get down deep, underneath the rootball, with less effort than with a traditional shovel or spade. A long-handled model will give you more leverage than a spade with a shorter handle. This may come in handy digging up giant clumps of hostas or daylilies; those rootballs can be large and heavy!



Pocket knife

A knife is necessary for cutting mushrooms off trees cleanly, without tearing the bark. When you're harvesting mushrooms from the ground, slicing the stem with a knife gives you a cleaner harvest. Pulling up the entire mushroom often delivers dirt and leaves along with your fungi, which makes cleaning them later a more onerous task.



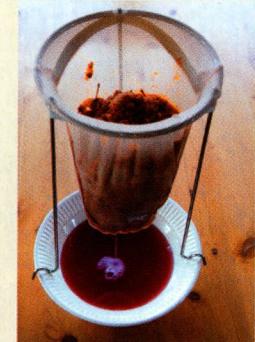
Collecting bags and basket

If you're out looking for mushrooms, take along several small paper or wax-paper bags and a basket. Mushrooms are delicate creatures and shouldn't be jostled about or piled too heavily on top of each other. Instead, divide your harvest among several small paper bags, then carry the bags in a single layer in the basket. This will keep the mushrooms from getting smushed. In a mushroom emergency you can roll up the bottom of your shirt to make a pouch and carry home your harvest. Necessity trumps elegance.



Jelly bag and stand

It's possible to use a strainer lined with cheesecloth to process fruit juice, but I like a dedicated jelly bag for several reasons. First, jelly bags tend to be long and narrow, and the extra weight of the vertically packed fruit makes extracting the juice faster. Second, the defined shape of a jelly bag and its tight fit over a jelly-bag stand makes for fewer accidents. A piece of cheesecloth can slide around on a strainer, letting fruit pulp and seeds pass through into the juice. Third, jelly bags are almost infinitely reusable, while the loose weave of cheesecloth makes it difficult to clean and more likely to tear. I've been using the same jelly bag for 10 years and it shows no signs of age.



Food mill

Some fruits (Juneberries and mulberries) have small seeds you won't mind eating. Others (cornelian cherries and Oregon grape) have large seeds that would seriously impair your eating enjoyment. A brief simmer softens the fruit, which you can then pass through a food mill, separating the seeds from the juice and pulp. Look for a food mill with interchangeable plates of different-size holes. You'll want to use the plate with the largest possible hole that will still catch the seeds while letting the pulp and juice pass through. The smaller the hole, the harder you'll have to turn the mill.



DANDELION

Taraxacum officinale

What it is: a perennial weed

Where to find it: gardens, parks, fields

Edible parts: leaves, flower buds, flower petals, roots

THE DETAILS

Does anyone *not* recognize the dandelion? I didn't think so. A ubiquitous denizen of sunny lawns, fields, and playgrounds, the dandelion elicits strong feelings. If its toothed leaves and fluffy yellow flowers are the bane of your existence, I'm about to suggest an excellent revenge. Or if, like me, you don't care what plants make up your lawn as long as they're soft underfoot, then here's how you can enjoy one of the most versatile weeds around.

HOW TO HARVEST

Dandelion greens are exceptionally nutritious, containing high levels of vitamin A, calcium, and potassium. They're tastiest in early spring, before they flower. As summer continues, leaves develop



These plump flowers are ready to harvest.

a bitter taste, although plants in shade may remain palatable. Grasp the rosette of foliage at its base, as close to the ground as possible. Twist and pull.

Unopened flower buds may be fried, boiled, or pickled. Once flowers have opened, the petals can be plucked to use in any number of ways. To separate the petals from their bitter-tasting calyx at the flower's base, grab



Separate dandelion petals from their bitter-tasting calyx.

the base of the petals in one hand, the calyx in the other, and twist in opposite directions.



Dandelion petals make a delicious summer wine.



To make sure you get the entire tap root, dig dandelions with a long-bladed shovel.

Dandelions have taproots that are best harvested in late fall to early spring. Remember that a piece left behind will produce more flowers. If you'd like to cultivate your dandelion crop, this isn't a problem, but if you're trying to eliminate dandelions, remove the entire root.

HOW TO EAT IT

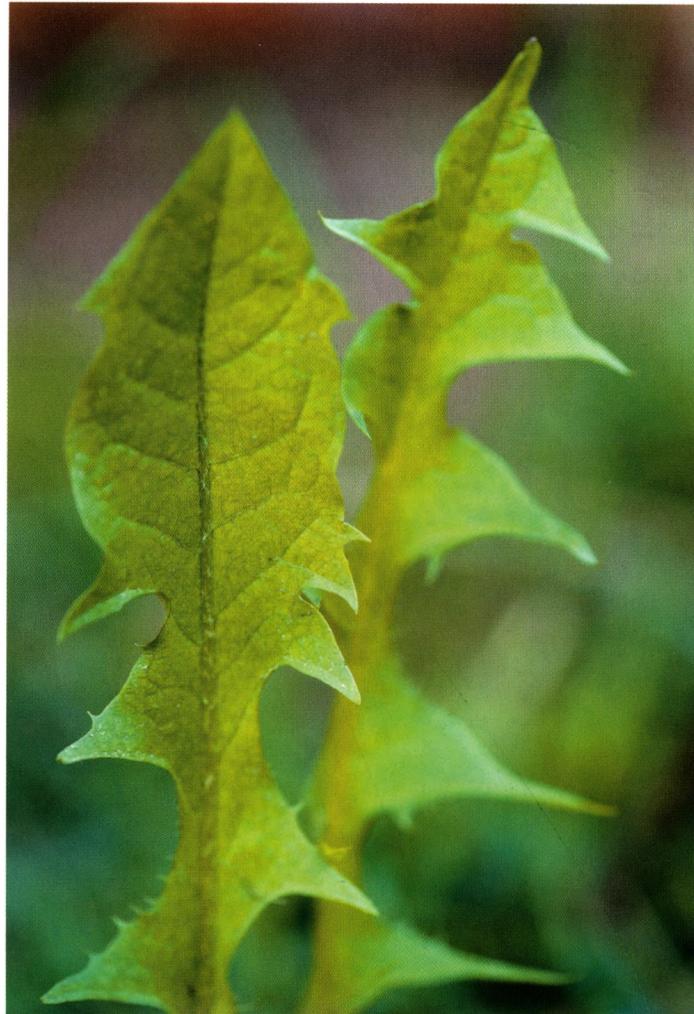
Dandelion greens are packed with vitamins and minerals. I won't lie to you — they're bitter. But fresh young dandelion leaves are a good kind of bitter, the kind that gets your digestive juices flowing. They can be used raw in salads to balance mild greens like chickweed or miner's lettuce. Taste a leaf before you pick a bunch. Dandelion foliage can go from pleasantly bitter to overpowering in just a few days. Cooking the leaves gets rid of some bitterness and extends their useful season. Blanch them in boiling water, then use them in hortopita (see recipe on page 221), or egg dishes, or simply

sauté them with olive oil and top with a squeeze of lemon juice.

Whole dandelion buds should be rinsed, then lightly boiled for no more than a minute or two. A little butter, some salt and pepper, and you're all set.

It takes 6 cups of dandelion petals to make a gallon of wine. That may not sound like a lot . . . until you start picking dandelion flowers and twisting off the petals. Petals have much less bulk than intact flowers do, and I usually need several days to collect enough for a batch of wine. If that seems daunting to you, add a cup of petals to oatmeal cookies in place of raisins, or to a loaf of savory bread, for a splash of color and texture.

While large roots can be eaten as a vegetable, their taste is mild and not particularly interesting. Instead, why not make your own version of New Orleans-style coffee by using roasted dandelion roots? Spread them out to dry for a few days, or dehydrate them in your dehydrator. Then roast the



These dandelion greens are tender and young, with just the right degree of bitterness; they're perfect for eating raw in a salad.

dry roots in a 350°F oven until the exterior of the roots is the color of your preferred coffee roast. This will take anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes. Let the roots cool, and then grind them to a powder. Pour 8

ounces of boiling water onto 1 tablespoon of the powder and let it steep for 5 minutes, then strain. The result is halfway between coffee and tea, and it's an excellent beverage with either milk or lemon.



NASTURTIUM

Tropaeolum majus

What it is: an annual garden flower

Where to find it: sun to part sun; gardens

Edible parts: leaves and flowers

THE DETAILS

This familiar garden annual grows easily from seed, and its flowers come in many colors. It quickly reaches blooming size and performs well as a ground cover in sunny gardens or as a spiller in containers and hanging baskets.

HOW TO HARVEST

Flowers should be picked when young and fresh. Small, young leaves may be harvested to use raw, and larger leaves can be picked and blanched. Nasturtium flowers and leaves can be harvested at any time during the growing season; they don't get bitter in high temperatures. Be sure to pick both the stem and the leaf when harvesting. You won't eat the stem, but it looks sad to leave a naked stem standing there, shorn

of its leaf. Seedpods are often harvested, pickled, and used as caper substitutes. Since I don't like capers, I'd rather leave the pods on the plants to ripen and produce seed for next year.

HOW TO EAT IT

Nasturtium blooms make a more interesting garnish than most flowers; they have a distinctive peppery-horseradishy taste, not too strong but not shy and retiring either. They can also be added to salads, floated on cold soups, or sprinkled on top of rice dishes. Tender leaves can be eaten raw in salads or sandwiches; their flavor is slightly stronger than that of the flowers. Raw leaves and/or flowers can also be used to make a peppery pesto.

The most interesting way to use nasturtium leaves is to blanch and stuff them. Older leaves may grow to 4 to 6 inches in diameter, providing wrappers suitable for stuffing.

The most interesting way to use nasturtium leaves is to blanch and stuff them. Older leaves may grow to 4 to 6 inches in diameter, providing wrappers suitable for stuffing. Blanch them in boiling water for a minute to render them pliable. Place a teaspoon of softened goat cheese in the center of the leaf, then roll it, turning the ends under and tucking them in to create a neat little package. The peppery taste of the leaf complements the goat cheese perfectly. Nasturtium leaves are not as coarse as grape or cabbage leaves and won't stand up to prolonged cooking times.



The foliage and flowers of nasturtium have a distinctive peppery taste.



CRAB APPLE

Malus species

What it is: a deciduous flowering tree

Where to find it: gardens, yards, parks, roadsides

Edible parts: fruit



Crab apple flowers come in a wide range of colors.

THE DETAILS

The crab apple is so popular as to be ubiquitous. The trees grow best in full sun but will tolerate part shade, although flowers and fruit will be more sparse. Blooms may be white, pink, or deep rose, and the fruit may be yellow, red, or orange. Technically, a crab apple is an apple with a diameter smaller than 2 inches. Many are face-twistingly sour and may have a mealy texture. Remember, they've been bred for looks, not taste. This may be why most people don't think of crab apple as an edible plant. Do yourself a favor and try a piece of fruit each time you pass a ripe crab apple tree; some are as crisp and tart as the best Granny Smith.



HOW TO HARVEST

Crab apples are persistent fruit. Left unpicked, they'll hang on the tree until squirrels or birds have eaten every last one. Crab apples have a lot of pectin (which accounts for the *very sour* taste). If you're going to make jelly, pick them early, before a frost. Otherwise, let them stay on the tree to sweeten up a bit, but pick them before they start to shrivel. Most crab apples produce so much fruit, you'll be able to pick enough to cook with and still leave some to admire as they hang like jewels on the branches of your tree.



Generally, larger crab apples (top) are tastier and have better texture than smaller fruit.

HOW TO EAT IT

If you're lucky to have crab apples with good texture, eat them raw or pickle them seasoned with cinnamon. These make a great side dish with pork and chicken. Even mealy fruit makes a superb jelly

and a wine that's reminiscent of port. Cooking completely obliterates the mealiness, making crab apples perfect for tarts, cakes, pies, and applesauce. Taste before you bake, as you may want to add a little extra sugar.