Tips for Safely Savoring Wild Edible Plants

Written by Sara Morris-Marano

Do not consume anything you have foraged until you are 100% sure of the species
Take your time and pay attention
Be aware of toxic look-alikes
Start with a mentor or guide to teach you about edible plants
Only eat ripe, in-season plants
Take note of subtle differences – whether it is an extra petal on a flower or a strangely toothed leaf, you might not be looking at the plant you thought you were!
Get a thorough and reliable field guide for identification – or two!
Be aware of the common toxic plants in your area
As always, it is unwise to try anything new during pregnancy
Do not forage near major roadsides, “perfect” lawns, or railroad tracks – these lands are often sprayed with pesticides and fertilizers or contaminated with gasoline (YUCK!!)
Be careful not to trespass – landowners may not want you foraging on their property
Beware of animal droppings or urine – if something is visibly contaminated, leave it alone
Be aware of where you put your hands – things like thorns and insect bites can harm you!
Wild, naturally occurring fungi and bacteria can still harm you. If you see a plant that has spots, foam, or is fuzzy, it could be anything from frog eggs to dangerous fungus. Let it be!
Have fun!! Foraging is a great way to enjoy nature and appreciate what it can provide.

Want to know more? Check out these resources:


Toxicity, Allergens, Look-Alikes, and More

Toxicity: Poison Ivy

This plant causes itching, burning, and painful skin irritations of areas with which it comes into contact.

- It appears as a trailing or climbing vine or a low shrub. It has aerial roots that look like hairs along its stem.
- It grows almond shaped leaves with no teeth to multiple teeth along its leaf edges.
- Leaves turn bright red or orange in the fall.

A Word about Mushrooms

- Mushrooms are extremely hard to identify.
- Safe varieties of this fungus often have deadly look-alikes.
- Do not forage for these unless you are an experienced mycologist.
- Do not eat mushrooms in the field – take them home and be sure of your identification first!

Look-Alikes

- Many non-toxic plants have extremely toxic look-alikes. Poison Hemlock is deadly to most mammals, including humans, even in small quantities.
- When identifying a plant, look at many characteristics to ensure you have identified it correctly.

Allergens

- Common Ragweed, though not edible, provokes serious seasonal allergies in many.
- Strong allergies to certain plants may extend into allergies to related herbs – allergies to ragweed often extend into allergies to chamomile.
- Be aware of personal reactions to plants as you forage.
Wild Garlic, Field Garlic

*(Allium vineale and similar species)*

- **FOUND** in lawns and fields, and edges of forests in the United States.
- **ALSO KNOWN AS** onion grass.
- **LEAF** is long, green and smells like onion.
- **TO HARVEST LEAVES**, pull off in handfuls of thinner leaves or cut at the base.
- **BEWARE** of pesticides, fertilizers, animal droppings, etc. as you forage.
- **FORAGE** this plant freely.

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Garlic Mustard

*(Alliaria petiolata)*

- **FOUND** in forests, especially in the northeastern and midwestern United States.
- **LEAF** is green, rounded, and uneven edge.
- **TO HARVEST LEAVES** pull off in clumps. Use within a couple days of picking or leaves will wilt.
- **CHECK** that underside of leaf is not spotted and has no milky sap.
- **BEWARE** of pesticides, fertilizers, animal droppings, etc. as you forage.
- **FORAGE** this plant freely. It is an invasive species.
Cream Cheese with Wild Garlic Shoots

Courtesy of Sara Morris-Marano
Makes 8 ounces

Ingredients:
- 1 – 8 oz. block cream cheese, softened
- ¼ cup finely minced wild garlic shoot
- ½ tsp. sea salt
- ½ tsp. cracked black pepper

Directions:
1. In a standing mixer, combine cream, salt and pepper. Mixer on low until combined and slightly airy.
2. Beat in the wild garlic shoots until combined throughout.
3. Serve on crackers or crostini.

Garlic Mustard Hummus

Courtesy of Sara Morris-Marano
Makes about 2 ¾ cups

Ingredients:
- 1 cup packed garlic mustard
- 2 cups canned chickpeas, no salt added
- 1 tsp black pepper
- 1 tsp cumin
- 1/3 cup tahini (sesame paste)
- 6 Tbs. freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 6 – 10 dashes Tabasco sauce
- Salt, to taste
- Water
- Veggies and/or crackers, for serving

Directions:
1. In a food processor, combine drained chickpeas, pepper, and cumin. Pulse until contents are minced.
2. Add the remaining ingredients to the food processor and process until coarsely pureed.
3. Adjust consistency using water and process until smooth and spreadable.
4. Salt to taste. Taste and adjust seasonings.
5. Chill or serve at room temperature.

Recipes are prepared at your own risk. Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey is not responsible for any damage, medically or otherwise, resulting from the preparation of food using instructions or recipes provided on this recipe card.
Chickweed  
*(Stellaria media)*

- **FOUND** in lawns and vegetable beds, disturbed ground such as gardens and fields, and sunny open spaces throughout the United States.
- **LEAF** is green, rounded, and has a pointed tip.
- **TO HARVEST LEAVES** pull off in clumps. Use within a couple days of picking or leaves will wilt.
- **CHECK** that underside of leaf is not spotted and has no milky sap.
- **BEWARE** of pesticides, fertilizers, animal droppings, etc. as you forage.
- **FORAGE** this plant freely.


Hairy Cress  
*(Cardamine hirsuta)*

- **FOUND** in moist disturbed areas, lawns and gardens throughout the United States.
- **LEAF** is green and each leaflet has its own stem.
- **FLOWER** is tiny, white, and sticks upward like a swan’s head.
- **TO HARVEST LEAVES** choose plants with lush green leaves and pull out entire plant. Remove any stiff stems and use youngest leaves.
- **BEWARE** of pesticides, fertilizers, animal droppings, etc. as you forage.
- **FORAGE** this plant freely.

Sautéed Chickweed with Ginger, Garlic, and Soy

Ingredients:
- 3 Tbs. olive oil
- 12 oz. chickweed (about 8 cups)
- 1 Tbs. minced garlic (or to taste)
- 2 tsp. grated ginger root
- ½ tsp. red pepper flakes
- ¼ cup chicken/vegetable stock or water
- 2 Tbs. low sodium soy sauce
- 1 tsp. sea salt
- ½ tsp. cracked black pepper
- 1 teaspoon sesame oil (optional)
- Sesame seeds, to garnish (optional)

Directions:
1. Heat a large skillet to medium heat. Add olive oil.
2. Add garlic, ginger, and red pepper flakes and sauté for 5 minutes, stirring often. Take care not to burn them.
3. Add chickweed all at once or in large batches (depending on how much will fit in the skillet). Toss to coat with the olive oil.
4. Add soy sauce, stock or water, and salt and pepper. Cover and cook 2 to 3 minutes, or until reduced in volume.
5. Toss gently and drizzle with sesame oil (if using). Top with sesame seed (if using). Serve!

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Hairy Cress Salad with Goat Cheese, Walnuts and Honey-Dijon Vinaigrette

Ingredients:
- 12 oz. cardamine leaves (about 8 cups)
- 1 shallot, minced
- 1 tsp. honey
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard
- 3 Tbs. white wine vinegar or champagne vinegar
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 4 ounces crumbled goat cheese
- ¾ cup walnut halves or chopped walnuts
- 1 tsp. sea salt
- ½ tsp. freshly cracked black pepper

Directions:
1. Place washed cardamine leaves in a bowl or serving dish.
2. In a small bowl, whisk together honey, Dijon mustard, and vinegar. Add the shallot. Slowly whisk in the olive oil, taking care to allow it to combine. Whisk in the salt and pepper.
3. Crumble the goat cheese onto the cardamine leaves. Scatter the walnut halves over the salad.
4. Drizzle the salad with the vinaigrette sparingly. Toss occasionally and add more, if necessary.

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Sheep Sorrel

*(Rumex acetosella)*

- **FOUND** in sunny lawns, roadsides, garden beds, and other disturbed areas in the United States.
- **LEAF** is spear-shaped and green with two pointy lobes on its base.
- **TO HARVEST LEAVES** cut at the base when the plant is less than one foot tall, preferably before the stalk turns reddish.
- **BEWARE** of pesticides, fertilizers, animal droppings, etc. as you forage
- **FORAGE** this plant freely.


Dandelion

*(Taraxacum officinale)*

- **FOUND** in gardens, fields, lawns and other sunny open spaces in the United States.
- **LEAF** is green and has pointed teeth on its edges.
- **FLOWER** is yellow, floral and sweet.
- **TO HARVEST LEAVES** pinch or cut off green leaves, preferably before flowering.
- **TO HARVEST FLOWERS** pinch off open flowers on a sunny day and use within a few hours. Use in jams, pies, and salads.
- **BEWARE** of pesticides, fertilizers, animal droppings, etc. as you forage.
- **FORAGE** this plant freely.

Fresh Fruit Salad with Sheep Sorrel and Sweet Whipped Cream

**Ingredients:**
- 3 cups fresh fruit, chopped to ½ to 1 inch bites (mango, pineapple, apple, banana, honeydew, cantaloupe, peach, kiwi, etc.)
- 1 – 2 cups assorted berries (strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, etc.)
- 1 tsp. lemon juice
- 2 teaspoons chopped sheep sorrel leaves
- 1 cup heavy whipping cream (cold)
- 2 Tbs. sugar

**Directions:**
1. In a bowl, toss fruit and berries. Add 1 tsp lemon juice to prevent the fruit from browning.
2. Chop the sheep sorrel leaves, and sprinkle them over the fruit. Toss to combine.
3. In a cold bowl, add the cold heavy cream. Whisk by hand or using a standing mixer until soft peaks form.
4. Add the sugar and continue to whisk until a thicker, hard-peaked whipped cream forms. Take care to not overbeat.
5. Serve fruit salad in individual bowls and top with whipped cream.

Orecchiette Pasta with Italian Sausage, Dandelion Greens, and Lemon Zest

**Ingredients:**
- 1 lb. orecchiette
- 3 Tbs. olive oil
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 – 2 tsp. crushed red pepper flakes
- 1 lb. sweet or hot Italian sausage, casings removed
- 1 – 2 tsp. sea salt, plus more for pasta water
- 1 teaspoon cracked black pepper
- 1 lb. dandelion greens, tough stems removed
- ¾ cup Parmesan cheese
- 2 tsp. lemon zest

**Directions:**
1. Heat a large skillet to medium or medium-high heat. Add the olive oil, and sauté garlic and crushed red pepper flakes until fragrant, about 3 minutes. Take care not to burn.
2. Increase heat to medium-high. Add the sausage, breaking up with a wooden spoon as it cooks. Cook until browned through, 7 – 10 minutes. Add the dandelion greens and cook until wilted, about 3 – 5 minutes. Adjust seasonings with salt and pepper.
3. Bring a large pot of water to a rolling boil. Season liberally with salt and add orecchiette. Cook until al dente, according to package directions.
4. When pasta is ready, reserve 2 ladlefuls of pasta cooking water and set aside.
5. Add sausage mixture and Parmesan to pasta in the pot over very low heat, adding a few Tbs. of reserved water at a time to adjust consistency. Mix in lemon zest.
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Dandelion Flower Lemonade

Ingredients:
- Room temperature water
- Juice of 6 lemons
- About 2 ½ quarts freshly picked dandelion flowers heads, picked on a sunny day
- Honey or simple syrup, to sweeten
- Mint, to garnish

Simple Syrup:
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup water

Directions:
To make lemonade:
1. Place dandelion flowers, juice of all lemons, and water in a gallon jug or jar.
2. Chill for 2-4 hours and allow to steep.
3. Sweeten to taste, adding honey and/or simple syrup.
4. Serve over ice with lemon wedges

To make Simple Syrup:
1. Combine sugar and water in a medium saucepan.
2. Bring to a simmer and allow sugar to dissolve.
3. Allow to cool before mixing into lemonade.

Deep-Fried Dandelion Flowers

Ingredients:
- 20-30 dandelion flowers, stem removed
- Neutral tasting oil, for frying (peanut, vegetable, canola)
- 2 Tbs. cornmeal
- Salt, to taste
- Black pepper, to taste
- 1 egg, beaten
- Water, as needed

Directions:
1. Rinse flowers thoroughly with water.
2. Heat a Dutch oven or frying skillet over medium heat. When hot, add a thin layer of oil.
3. Combine the cornmeal, salt, pepper, and egg to make the batter. Adjust consistency of batter as needed.
4. Dip flowers in batter and fry in batches, for about 3 minutes or until golden.
5. Drain fried flowers on paper towels, and serve.