

# Getting the most from

# NATURE 4

by Mike Jarman

# WILD FOODS

**This article is all about the plants and trees that can be used for food. Exactly the same plants that our ancestors used for food still surround us today. This is the great thing about looking for wild foods – they have been used by mankind for thousands of years and there's no reason why you can't use them today. Even better, they are free, haven't been covered in pesticides and haven't had to be transported great distances. All you have to do is to step out of your front door to begin your wild food adventure.**

## In the beginning

Agriculture as we understand it has only been around for some 10,000 years. Prior to this all wild food was exactly that. People, especially the women, would have spent hours foraging for wild plants whilst the men hunted. This pattern can still be seen in the few hunter gatherer tribes that exist today.

The tragedy is that this vast databank of knowledge, that took thousands of years to build up, has mostly been lost today in Britain. Today we have an almost total reliance on shops to provide for all our food needs. There are very, very few people who have even the slightest ability to feed themselves from the wild. The good news is that this is very easy to remedy and in the next two articles I will show you how!

## Getting Out There

The best way to become adept at finding wild foods is to start slowly. Learning to recognise 10 of the most common edible plants is the way I would recommend to anyone interested in this subject. Once you have got to grips with 10 plants, then you are well on your way. All you then have to do is to keep adding to your knowledge a little at a time and within a couple of years, you will amaze your family and friends with your ability to find all manner of edible plants.

Over the course of the next 2 issues, I shall introduce you to 10 easily found and widely available sources of wild food. Just use the following basic rules for gathering wild foods and you shouldn't go far wrong.

## Basic Rules of Gathering

1. Don't pick from areas that are polluted – avoid roadsides, land that has been sprayed or areas where dogs are walked.
2. Be 100% sure you have identified the plant you are picking. If you're unsure, leave it alone! You can always come back another day.
3. Get permission from the landowner before you go foraging for wild foods.
4. Don't be greedy. Only take what you need and only take a little from any one plant. Try and

gather from a wide area - the effect you have is minimised.

5. Nature Reserves, SSSI's and other protected areas are just that – Protected. Don't forage here.
6. When you get home, wash the plants thoroughly and discard anything that's old or decayed. And finally, consider growing some of these common wild plants in your garden. It makes life much easier for you and will add a lot of biodiversity to your garden. Your children in particular will be fascinated when you bring these plants into the kitchen and prepare them for eating.

## 1. The Nettle (*Urtica Dioica*) - gathering time March to June

Incredibly widespread and abundant all over Europe, the common stinging nettle is surely known to us all. In fact, I'm sure we all have some childhood memories of being stung. However, the nettle is also one of the most useful edible wild food plants. It has been widely eaten for centuries, can be used to make excellent cordage and has even been used to as a cotton substitute to make clothing.

The leaves are best gathered in early spring, when the plant is young. Always pick the youngest, juiciest leaves. I've picked young leaves later in the year but they never seem to taste as good once past mid June. Thereafter I've normally found that the taste becomes increasingly bitter. Once you have collected your nettle leaves, all they need is a simple wash and then to be boiled for about 5 minutes in the barest amount of water. The sting completely disappears and the nettles taste much like spinach. They are also just as good, being packed with iron, potassium and vitamins A and C.

You can also make nettle tea just as easily. Boil a handful of nettle leaves in 1 pint of water until it turns a light green (adjust the boiling time depending on how strong you like it – the longer you boil, the stronger the tea becomes). Simply add a little sugar and perhaps even some lemon. It's very refreshing and is even a very good natural treatment for those who suffer from Hayfever, as it contains antihistamines.

There is an amazing array of recipe ideas for nettles on the Internet. Just type 'nettle' into any search engine.



The common stinging nettle

## 2. Hazelnut (*Corylus avellana*) - gathering time mid September onwards

Another widely available and incredibly tasty wild food, the hazelnut should be gathered from mid September onwards. They start to ripen at this time but you need to move fast. The squirrels go crazy for them and you can often find them all disappeared within a very short period of time. I've known them to almost all vanish within 2 weeks in certain areas. If you can't see any on the tree, look on the ground. You may be lucky! Once you collect them, keep them dry. They are prone to go mouldy if you don't.

Hazel nuts are packed with protein, carbohydrate and fat and are an incredibly valuable food source in late autumn. Incredibly, pound for pound, they contain twice as much protein, 7 times more fat and 5 times more carbohydrate than an equal weight of hens' eggs. Just remember that the nut is the seed for a new Hazel tree, so don't swipe them all!

Just how important they were to our ancestors was dramatically brought home in 1995 when the remains of hundreds of thousands of burned hazelnut shells were found in a pit on an island in Scotland. They were carbon dated to 7,000BC and it is thought that the hazelnuts were a major part of the diet of these people, since no large game was thought to have existed on the island.



Hazelnuts – packed with energy and delicious to eat

## 3. Sweet Chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) - gathering time mid September onwards

Another nut that surely needs little in the way of introduction. Although less common in Scotland, these are common trees all over much of the UK and winter just wouldn't be winter without these nuts being roasted. They were so highly valued (and in some poorer areas still are) as a source of food that they were a major part of peoples' diet throughout much of southern Europe.

From a mature tree, it is possible to easily fill small sack in a very short space of time. Several of these trees in a close area could easily be responsible for feeding people a large part of their diet for weeks, if not longer. Even better, while some survival food may be a case of 'grin and bear'

**WARNING – ONLY PICK PLANTS THAT YOU HAVE POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED AS SAFE TO EAT. NEVER, EVER PICK A PLANT THAT YOU ARE UNSURE ABOUT. IF YOU ARE UNSURE, LEAVE IT ALONE! SOME PLANTS MAY MAKE YOU ILL BUT SOME PLANTS CAN KILL YOU.**

rather than enjoyment, the humble sweet chestnut is superlative when roasted. One of my earliest memories of being shown wild foods was roasting these and being amazed at how delicious they were. The Romans thought so highly of them as a food source that they deliberately planted them all over areas that they conquered. The next time somebody asks, "What have the Romans ever done for us?" you know what to say!

You can even make the humble chestnut into flour. When dried, finely ground and mixed half and half with normal flour, it adds a very distinct taste to any baking experience. This flour is available in many larger UK supermarkets and whole food shops and is definitely worth a try.

One small thing you must remember – ALWAYS prick the skins before roasting the nut. They will explode otherwise!



Sweet chestnut – versatile and very tasty

## 4. Cattail (*Typha latifolia*) - available almost year round

Another very wide spread and common plant, cattail is often known as Bulrush, reedmace or corn dog grass by the Americans. Strictly speaking calling it Bulrush is incorrect – Bulrush is actually a different plant – but this nomenclature is so common today that biologist have just about given up trying to educate people about correct terminology. The cattail is sometimes called the 'survival supermarket' because it is so useful in so many ways.

I always tell students on our courses that the best way to recognise the cattail if you're unsure is to look for the 'sausage on a stick'. This unmistakable identification factor helps to tell it apart from other plants that look very similar in the initial growth stages. In particular, one of these similar plants, Yellow Iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), has a leaf that looks quite similar but is poisonous. If you're at all unsure, wait for the distinctive 'sausage' to appear.

These green 'sausages' can be boiled as a vegetable in early summer. Very shortly after this, the 'sausage' has a fine yellow pollen on its outside. This pollen can be gathered easily by bending the head into a container and brushing it off with the hand. Used as a half and half mixture with normal flour, it is particularly good for pancakes or flat breads, giving these foods a wonderful golden tinge.

The root or 'rhizome' can be eaten from autumn to early spring and is particularly beneficial at this time, being packed with starch as the plant prepares to send up new shoots in spring. In fact, when little

else is growing, this plant is an absolutely brilliant source of carbohydrate. Just in case you don't know, carbohydrate is 'the fuel for your engine' – well over half your daily diet should be carbohydrates. Carefully lift the roots with your hands, wash off in water and place straight onto a fire. They only take about 10 minutes to cook. To eat them, chew the inner pulp – this releases the starch. Spit out the pulp once sufficiently chewed. The taste is pretty bland but the carbohydrate obtained is well worthwhile.

The final part of the plant that can be eaten is when it is about 2-3 feet high. By pulling on the plant, it will normally break clean away from the root. Peel away the outside leaves until you are left with a white part – this is known as 'Cossack asparagus'. This can be eaten raw but it is much better if cooked. It can be boiled but is much better shallow fried. Simply chop it up, much as you would a carrot, and fry until golden brown.



© Hosking Nursery – The conspicuous 'sausage heads' on common cattail

## 5. Garlic Mustard / Jack-by-the-Hedge (*Alliaria petiolata*) - gathering time March to June

Jack-by-the-Hedge is one of those fantastic plants that is widespread, common and numerous. Known by several names, including Garlic Mustard and Hedge Garlic, its range includes all of Europe, western China and northern India. Whilst rightly regarded as one of the best food plants available in spring in Europe, it is not so welcome elsewhere. It has been planted since the 1860's in America and unfortunately is now classed as an invasive species there.

Despite the American problems, it is a 'must' for you to identify and use. The leaves have a mild garlic taste that is an excellent addition to any salad. In particular, it adds a delicious garlic taste to trout – this is hard to beat when simply grilled over a fire.

Not surprisingly, given its name, it is most commonly found in hedgerows but can also be found in paths in woods or shady

disturbed areas. When the leaves are crushed they exude a wonderful garlic smell that makes it easy to identify. Even better, there are no poisonous look-alikes, so you can be reasonably sure that you won't get in trouble identifying this one.

I have it growing in my garden (it tastes that good in salads!) and it can even produce a second growth in late August. The first growth is the best one for taste though. The heart shaped leaves can also be added to vegetable dishes, meats, etc – anywhere you'd normally use garlic, you can use this. Experiment with the number of leaves you use to gauge the taste you require.



Garlic Mustard grows profusely in hedgerows and shady woodland paths

Until you are totally confident in your identification and picking, it is always a good idea to take one of the many excellent plant identification books with you. They really help to eliminate any confusion. Once you are confident and as long as you follow the rules and pick wisely, all this free food will be available to you year after year. You can then look forward to supplementing your meals with nature's bounty – a truly satisfying experience, both for your stomach, your taste buds and your wallet.

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