

Foraging forays on your doorstep

This article appeared in the May/June 2020 issue of Open Up Magazine; it includes references to areas in south Manchester where the magazine is published. Some additional pictures, taken by Danielle Lowy, the author, have been added.

Access to food is a big topic at the moment. As well as contending with long the supermarket queues and worrying whether food shelves have been cleared by other customers, the whole issue of food production and distribution is being questioned. We've taken for granted our access to tropical foods flown in from far-afield, the availability of unseasonal vegetables grown and shipped from Europe, and low cost fruit and vegetables grown in the UK and picked by cheap foreign labour – which food UK farmers are worried may now rot in the fields unpicked. Some say it's time to consider simpler systems of food production. And what could be simpler and more natural than picking some of your own food from the wild? As we are currently living in ever-decreasing geographical circles, it is a perfect time to look at and take joy from what is nearby, and welcome pleasures gained by life at a slower pace. Whether you are using your once-day form of outdoor exercise to walk to your local park or wildlife area, or if you're lucky to have a garden, you'll discover nature's generous bounty at your feet.

Ideally, an initial foray into foraging would be with an experienced forager or on a guided workshop. However there are many plants that are easy to recognise, that can be double-checked in a book or online guide. If you feel a little wary of wild plants, take a look in your fridge: where do you think all those fruits and vegetables originated? In the wild of course, before they were cultivated by farmers. Foraging helps you go back to your roots, connecting with your food in a more natural way. It is only more recent generations that have become suspicious of anything that's not sanitised and packaged on the supermarket shelf. Nature offers us wild plants foods that are nutritious, as well as having many healing properties. Let's take a look at some popular, easy to find and identify local wild foods.

Wild food pickings in wildlife areas

Between them, I have regularly picked and eaten these delicious plants in Chorlton Ees, Chorlton and Sale Water Park and Ryebank Fields. There are many edible fungi here but, due to the dangers of picking the wrong ones, this is best learned from an expert.

Wild garlic is a big favourite and easy to recognise by its smell. It grows profusely from early spring, and can be eaten in salads, added to cooked meat and vegetables and made into a soup with nettles. I've even fermented, dehydrated and powdered it to use as a delicious, umami-laden condiment.



Garlic mustard is similar in taste and usage, possibly a bit strong to eat raw in a salad, but delicious chopped up as a herb in, say, new potatoes.



Three-cornered leek is another tasty garlicky flavoured plant that resembles a white bluebell, but with a distinctive smell when rubbed. No plants can legally be dug up from the wild to grow in your garden, and this one in particular is not for growing at home as it's a fast-spreading menace.



Common hogweed, not to be confused with the much rarer giant hogweed that can cause severe burns, is a wonderful springtime treat. The small shoots and unopened buds are lovely simply sautéed in butter.



Elder trees provide both scented flowers for cordial or champagne, and berries in the autumn- if everyone hasn't picked all the flowers in the spring. Don't forget the birds like berries too.

For those with a sweet tooth, there are many berries for crumbles, jams, jellies, chutneys and fruit leathers including **elderberries, blackcurrants, crab apples and raspberries**. You can even flavour your chutneys with the cardamom-like seeds from the dried flowerheads of the hogweed as they will all be ready at a similar time at the end of summer.

Why not finish off with a relaxing cup of tea made from **pineapple weed**? This low-growing flower related to chamomile has a lovely pineapple-like scent when crushed.

Wild food in your garden or local parks

Some people say weeds are just a plant in the wrong place. They appear in gardens, blown by the wind, dropped by birds, carried by little mammals like squirrels and cats, as well as accidentally transferred by from shop-bought plants.

As a gardener I have felt stressed by the pressure to present a regimented ornamental garden with a neat lawn, free of any weeds, so a couple of years ago I decided to learn to love my weeds. It was so exciting to unearth a range of edibles I'd done nothing to cultivate! I discovered these common weeds all have edible, and even medicinal properties. Most edibles are nice combined with other ingredients, and the herbal teas are lovely as combinations too.

Feverfew is well known for alleviating headaches and migraines by chewing a couple of the bitter-tasting leaves.

Hairy bittercress is related to watercress, giving a lovely peppery taste to salads, or with a sliced orange.

Chickweed and the small emerging leaves of **ground elder** can be eaten as salad leaves or made into pesto. I have enough ground elder to stock a supermarket, but unfortunately, it's not my favourite.

Self-heal is a beautiful low growing flower with many medicinal properties such as healing wounds, calming nerves and soothing sore throats. It can be used externally and drunk as a tea. I was so excited to find a patch of self-heal in my garden; I just snip off some flowers but don't pull up the plant to ensure it returns year after year.

Plantain (wide leaf and ribwort) is also a good herbal tea and acts as an anti-inflammatory that helps with insect bites and nettles stings - chew a leaf and place on affected area. Broadleaf plantain makes tasty crisps tossed in a small amount of salted, lemony oil and a pinch of paprika. Oven bake for a few minutes and eat immediately.

Dandelions are packed with nutrients. Personally I find them too bitter, but apparently, they can be blanched for a better taste. If you have the patience, dig up and roast the roots to make a tasty coffee substitute. Don't forget to leave some flowers for the bees.

Daisies have edible leaves and flowers to add to salads, as well as for herbal teas.

Wood sorrel is a pretty plant with delicate white flowers, both of which add a lovely lemony taste to a salad.

Nettles have definitely earned their place in the heart (and stomachs) of foragers. They are profuse, delicious and packed full of vitamins and minerals. It's recommended to snip off the top 4-6 leaves (wearing gloves!).

I love them as a fresh tasting herbal tea for their antihistamine properties, as well as in soup (Fry onions and wild garlic, add potato, carrot and two big handfuls of nettle tops plus water or stock. Cook to a pulp and blend.) This spring I have chopped into a thick pancake batter to make fritters, with a dipping sauce of chili, herbs and yoghurt.

Isn't it fascinating to find out what these often-reviled weeds can offer, completely free of effort?

Even 'horrors' like bindweed and marestail have beneficial medicinal qualities you can investigate.

These weeds are also found in parks and other wild areas, usually more profusely than your garden.



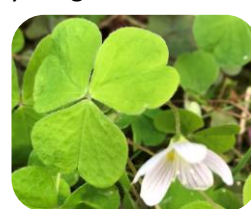
Hairy Bittercress



Self Heal



Rat Tail Plantain



Wood Sorrel

Eat your ornamental garden

Have you ever had a nibble of your hosta, slipped some begonia stems in your crumble or sprinkled cornflower and calendula leaves on your ice-cream? Me neither, but I'm planning to this summer! It's surprising to realise how many of the decorative plants grown in our well-tended gardens are actually edible, not just ornamental. Like wild foraged foods, these ornamental garden plants can be eaten, drunk as herbal teas or taken as complementary medicine. For instance honeysuckle, mallow, lavender, calendula, day lilies, mullein, vervain, chamomile, begonias, Himalayan honeysuckle, sedums, lilacs, dahlia, sunflower seeds and so many more have edible flowers, stems, roots or seeds. Even house plants have edible and healing properties: aloe vera leaves can be squeezed for the gel to heal burns and other skin conditions.

Let's take just one common garden plant, the common **flowering currant**. Last year I steeped a jar of flowers in apple cider vinegar for about three weeks, then strained for a delicious floral flavoured vinegar. This spring I have combined flowers with organic orange peel (no chemicals in the peel) and sugar to make a gorgeously scented, flavoured syrup for adding to gin or vodka, or to dilute as a cordial. I put a few flowers in salads as they are pretty and have a sweet lemony taste. And I've drunk herbal teas made from the emerging leaf buds, flowers and other foraged herbs. When you prune your flowering currant in the autumn, stick some of the twiggy prunings in compost and you'll have some new plants to share next year.



Another popular summer plant, **nasturtium** is not just easy grow, it's packed with vitamins and minerals, has anti-viral and antibiotic properties and a delicious peppery taste. You can eat the flowers and leaves in salads or sandwiches and pickle the seeds like capers.

Many flowers and herbs make delicious herbal teas: combine relaxing lemon balm leaves, lavender flowers, rose petals and blackberry leaves for a calming night-time tisane.

If you stop to think about it: how daft is a system where we turn a large percentage of our garden into lawn, and grow things to look at, then get in gas-guzzling cars to buy food that's travelled hundreds of miles, been packaged and put on shelves, when we could be eating what's under our nose free of charge!

Words of advice:

Get to know the plants well. If you're not 100% sure, don't eat it. If you are sure, have an exploratory nibble rather than a full-on meal. Pick and eat in moderation.

Beware of some look-alike plants eg cow parsley and hemlock are similar looking.

Be mindful of pollution from cars on roadsides as well as active poisoning with herbicides by local councils or landowners spraying nearby fields eg spot tell-tale signs of yellowing or dying plants.

If something is rare or protected, please do not pick it.

Be aware of invasive plants like Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam. Although they have edible properties, you need to be 100% confident you are not going to spread them so may want to steer clear.

Delights of foraging

Foraging enables you to broaden the range of nutritious chemical-free foods you eat, at the same time connecting with the natural landscape where you live and enjoying the great outdoors. And it's completely free of charge!

Links

Mark Galloway's excellent guide to wild food <http://www.gallowaywildfoods.com/>

Plants for a Future is a fantastic database of plants, covering edible and medicinal uses, cultivation, hazards and tons more <https://pfaf.org/>

Food for Free is a little pocket guide to foraging in the UK by long-time foraging expert Richard Mabey.

Local forage workshops: Jesper Launder is a local foraging expert and trained herbalist
<http://www.jesperlaunder.com/>

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I am not a botanist or a foraging expert, simply someone who has enjoyed learning about wild food and edible weeds by attending workshops and reading resources online and in books.