



No. 3 - January 2009

It's round three of **foraging TIMES** and this time we're looking at the general springtime period... although 'Spring' may happen sooner or later in your part of the world while in the UK the hard frosts a few weeks ago may delay things.

In my area of the world forage spring greens have been around since September with the frosts causing serious leaf stress to those edible plants which have been peeking out of the ground for a couple of months. It will be interesting to see how growth in the next month or two develops, or whether we are destined for a 'pause' in the growing cycle.

Personally I never worry about frost damage to forage greens since most of the plants we deal with are tenacious fellows, and given time they'll re-appear providing there hasn't been total destruction by the cold. One does also hope that this year Britain's weather is more favourable, the previous two years having being particularly 'moist'.

Springtime is the time when you expect to find primrose [*Primula vulgaris*], the violets [*Viola odorata* & *riviniana*] and lesser celandine [*Ranunculus ficaria*].

Primrose flowers and the young leaves (below) are edible, however primrose is a 'protected' species in Northern Ireland **and the plant can produce allergic reactions in some people, so it must be treated with some caution if you have never tried it before, or suffer from allergies.** The leaves have a slight bitter after-taste and are best used in soups or pottages where the sauce can take the edge of that slight bitterness, while the sulphur-yellow flowers can be used to garnish all sorts of dishes or sugar frosted.



Ramsons.... One very good springtime edible green.



A reminder of what Ramsons [*Allium ursinum*] flowers look like... A cluster of flowers composed of quite pointed, white, petals.



Primrose flowers probably need no introduction, their sulphur-yellow colour being one of the classic springtime blooms.

SAFE FORAGING

THE GOLDEN RULE...

If you cannot identify a wild plant with 100% certainty as being one of the edible species NEVER use it as food. If you have the slightest hesitation over a plant's identity be safe and MOVE ON. Similarly, if you cannot remember which part of the plant is used leave it alone.

MOST IMPORTANT...

Check your personal tolerance to ANY new edible wild plant before consuming in quantity. If you have a medical condition or are taking medication then you should seek professional medical advice before consuming edible wild plants as they may contain constituents that impair or amplify that medication.

AND DO...

Be 'aware' of the environment that you are gathering from. Is there possible contamination from effluent, car exhaust emissions, sprays, dogs and so on?

LASTLY...

NEVER consume foliage which is dead or dying, or that which is yellowed discoloured (that COULD be just from bad soil nutrients it could also be an indicator of weed-killers at work!).

Violet leaves too can have a slight after-taste if they aren't young, and again are best used in a similar manner to primrose leaves. The thing is, violet leaves contain large amounts of vitamin A (pro-vitamin A I believe), while the edible flowers also contain large amounts of vitamins.

The leaves and fine leaf stalks of the yellow flowered lesser celandine [*Ranunculus ficaria*] (below and right) is another potentially bitter-edged wild veggie green, and needs similar treatment being cooked in soups or pottages. All these three perennial plants should be found in the early part of spring but local conditions may advance or delay the growing season.



And how about some flavouring wild greens? I'm sure you are familiar with ramsons [*Allium ursinum*] which we covered in the last [foraging TIMES](#). This garlic flavoured veggie should be available from early to mid spring. The whole plant is edible, although you will need permission to dig up the bulbs if you do not own the land where you forage. By using the developing seed capsules you can usually extend the working life of this plant by another three or four weeks after the leaves have passed their sell-by date.

As Ramsons fades away you should then start finding our second garlic-flavoured plant, hedge garlic or Jack-by-the-Hedge [*Alliaria petiolata*]. If you have a mild climate like Cornwall hedge garlic is around for a very large part of the year. The first year growth of this biennial plant can actually be found in the winter months as a background herb but is not as well flavoured as the springtime foliage. If cooking hedge garlic rather than using it as a salad item then it needs to be lightly cooked, otherwise it loses its flavour.



Above: leaflets of Salad Burnet.



Another flavouring plant which straddles the winter-spring divide is salad burnet [*Poterium sanguisorba*] (above, and leaves BELOW LEFT) with its cucumber-ish flavoured leaves which grows throughout the winter season. The taste is more of cucumber skin than pulp)

NOTE, however, that 'uprooting' ANY wild plant in the UK is illegal under the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981 unless you have 'authorisation' [permission]. Similar laws may exist in other countries.

WILD FOOD IDEAS for Spring

Watercress & Prune Soup

A handful or two of watercress, cooked in chicken stock with some grated ginger root, a splash of light soya sauce, and 1 or 2 chopped prunes (which you could be carrying as a trail food), plus a pinch of sugar. If you're not into prunes add a little chopped apple instead.

Nettles & Peanuts

Peanuts have lots of vitamin B while nettles provide good amounts of vitamin A and C. Other spinach-like wild greens such as fat-hen, good king henry, or orache can substitute for the nettles later in the year.

Handfuls of washed and chopped greens are added to chopped onion and garlic which have been sweated till soft with a little chilli powder. Chicken stock and a squeeze of lemon juice are added, then a table-spoon or two of crunchy, peanut butter (the unsweetened kind) stirred in and well distributed.



The last of our flavoursome greens at this time of year is cress-like in taste. It's winter cress [*Barbarea vulgaris*] (above) which takes you through the winter months into early spring. It's replaced by lady's-smock [*Cardamine pratensis*] in the early to mid part of spring, followed by watercress [*Nasturtium officinalis*] which begins to gain momentum in growth as we go through April and May into the summer period. Both the latter two plants like moist conditions; lady's-smock more at home in watermeadows and marshy areas while watercress itself really requires a silty habitat with flowing water.

As with all wild plants destined for your cooking pot seek younger and emerging growth rather than old specimens which are likely to be bitter and/or chewy; being pointless to cook, and wasting both your time and fuel resources. But, as we see how the growing season plays out after the recent cold snap, any delay might be to your advantage, shifting the life-cycle of some of these tasty greens later in the year.

There's all sorts of information on foraging for edible wild greens via the main website:

www.wildfoodschool.co.uk

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Other WFS Snippets...

For anyone visiting Cornwall on holiday during 2009... I should be found giving talks at the Eden Project on the *FIRST* Thursday of most months (March through September, and possibly October if the weather holds out). I'm involved with a number of collaborative wild food projects with Eden folk. So drop by if you happen to be around the South West.

Also for anyone in the London area and South East... I may well be doing another stint at the Natural History Museum in June. As usual it's all about wild foods, but at the moment the date is not confirmed.

In January WFS added 3 new Historical E-text CD-ROMs to the collection... The three books being Mordecai Cooke's classic texts on British Fungi (edible and poisonous). The text of an old classic American edible fungi book will be launched in the next month or two.

FINALLY... If you have an recipe idea or wild food snippet to share with others readers drop an E-mail and I'll consider it for adding to a future issue of **foraging TIMES**.

**That's it...
Happy Hunting.**

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