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It's time for another edition of **foraging TIMES** and by the time this one reaches you hopefully you'll be seeing some Spring growth of the edible wild greens covered in the last edition of FT. That said, various phone calls round the country do suggest that things are sluggish in one or two places.

In this issue I want to spend some time on just one of the edible wild greens, Alexanders [*Smyrnium olusatrum*], every part of which can be used in the kitchen. Alexanders is more readily found in the southern part of Britain where it's warmer, more frequently occurring in coastal areas. If you're travelling on the Continent, particularly near Mediterranean areas, you'll also find it quite commonly.



ABOVE: Early second year alexanders growth.

Alexanders is a biennial, that is a plant with a two year life-cycle. And although first year growth might provide you with tender greens there's more of it in the initial second year growth as seen above.

The problem with alexanders, however, is that as the plant ages (and the shiny leaves darken considerably) the whole plant takes on a quite bitter edge, and produces an after-taste in the mouth - a bit like you get from the after kick of celery. From a personal point of view I find the taste of even the darker leaves of the spring growth (as seen below) frequently too bitter to



Alexanders' bright green leaves are a bit reminiscent of celery leaves in shape.



There's a single end leaf lobe.



The leaf margins are toothed / serrated.

ALEXANDERS IS ONE OF THE UMBELLIFERS (which includes hemlock and other toxic plants) SO IT'S ESSENTIAL TO IDENTIFY ALEXANDERS CORRECTLY. 'WALK AWAY' IF THERE'S ANY DOUBT.

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!).

make a vegetable green, and I tend to always plump for the leaf shoots (pictured right).



The other aspect of this plant that you have to contend with is that alexanders has an aromatic quality which is very definitely not to everyone's taste and liking. It is in the leaves, the root, stems and seeds. Boiling in salted water helps diminish this pungency to a large extent, but even then there can be an after-taste.



Alexanders produces quite large carrot/parsnip-like roots in the second year. The 2nd year root seen above is stunted, having been grown in shallow ground (you can see part of a lateral root at the top of the picture where the plant has pushed out new root material in the search for nutrients). Normally you'd expect a taproot of about 2-3cms diameter at the top (in year 2), and having a useful length of about 20cms. First year roots of about 10cms or so are perhaps the best material, but then you need to consider the sustainability of your alexanders resource and whether you want foliage, flowerbuds and seeds later on.

Also potentially on the menu are unopened alexanders flowerbuds which are tender enough to be used as a salad ingredient (I shred them), and the dried seeds.

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

www.wildfoodschool.co.uk

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The first pale shoots are definitely the best.



In cross-section alexanders roots almost look like those of carrot or parsnip.

1st year roots have a pale brown skin which by the end of the 2nd year develops into a tough dark brown state. By that time, however, the plant is beyond any usefulness as food, so you'd be wasting your time trying to cook up root material.



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

WILD FOOD IDEAS for Alexanders

Young alexanders leaves gently cooked in butter are tasty, while the unopened flower buds may be used in salads or cooked.

The seeds (black when mature) can almost be used like cardamom for their aromatic quality. Try adding a few seeds to rice when cooking to give it an aromatic edge.



Sliced alexanders root in a white sauce. Soaking the sliced root in water for several hours will help take the edge off the pungent aromatic taste. The young leaves also can be added to a white sauce which goes quite well with fish.



Above are some smaller alexanders roots (halved) which have been boiled until tender then drizzled with light soy sauce to which a bit of molasses has been added.

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**.

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