



## No. 5 - March 2009

Spring is very definitely upon us as you read this edition of **foraging TIMES**, though it does appear (at least in Cornwall) that some of the spring plants have stalled a little, while the next layer of plants is already emerging – as in bluebells, red campion and stitchwort. Some specimens of the last two species are already in flower down here in Cornwall.

The March-April period of the year is when **scurvygrass** [*Cochlearia officinalis*] - a mainly estuarine river and coastal plant once used as an anti-scorbutic - is about to come into flower bud mode. [Pictured below]



SG has an acrid fiery taste, almost like horseradish. The first time I tried SG was when it was flowering and the leaves had a revolting after-taste. Thinking along the lines that cooking SG leaves might diminish the fieriness and after-taste – as does cooking winter-cress leaves - I boiled a handful in the hope that it might become more palatable. Wrong idea! On the Richter scale of palatability cooked SG can only reach the depths of dock roots and old burdock leaves in terms foulness. On the other hand if you get SG leaves when they are young it does make an interesting salad item.

In the old days they used to 'juice' SG and drink it as an antidote to scurvy. Thumbing through an old 18<sup>th</sup> century book a year or two ago I found a couple of recipes which show how SG was used. One for *Scurvy Grass Ale* included 6 gallons of new ale, half a pound of scraped horseradish, four lemons, and half a peck of scurvygrass. Yum! Other recipes had scurvygrass juice mixed with orange juice and honey. That's more like it.



While still on the subject of peppery plants **cuckoo-flower** or **lady's-smock** [*Cardamine pratensis*] – pictured below - usually makes an appearance (as in flowering) during April-May in damp ground and water-meadows. Also known as **bittercress** (there are other plants also called bittercress), the taste is warm and peppery and makes a fine salad ingredient. Match it with a handful of bland-tasting **chickweed** [*Stellaria media*] for an impromptu outdoors salad.

## 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!).



Above: Lady's-Smock / Cuckooflower.

Another salad plant - and this one having a cucumber-like taste – is **salad-burnet** [*Poterium sanguisorba*] which should be starting its full growth period around now although it grows throughout the winter months too. [Pictured below]



ABOVE: Salad Burnet has distinctive leaves.

And how about some more flavouring wild greens? I'm sure you are familiar with **ramsons** [*Allium ursinum*], the garlic flavoured veggie which you should be available from early to mid spring. The whole plant (pictured on the following page) 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.

## SPRINGTIME WILD FOOD IDEA

### Spring Soup

1-2 handfuls spring leaves  
 - roughly chopped  
 1 tbsp. butter / fat / oil  
 1 tbsp. plain flour  
 ½ pint stock [vegetable or chicken] - hot  
 1 egg yolk  
 Pepper

The spring leaves for this are the ones covered in the main text, but also violet, ground ivy, wild strawberry and nettles – a combination that supplies vitamins A and C - while the egg yolk provides you with protein. If you use plain water instead of stock then you may wish to add seasoning; Stock, however, does help take off any bitter edge found in the leaves.

- Melt the butter in a pan over a medium heat and then stir in the flour.
- Mix and cook the 'roux' for a few minutes, then remove from the heat.
- Add the stock to the pan a bit at a time, whisking with a fork to develop a smooth sauce.
- Return the pan to the heat to thicken the sauce, stirring to prevent lumps forming, and cook for about 10 to 12 minutes.
- Then add the leaves and allow to boil for a couple of minutes, before whisking in the egg yolk, and seasoning with a little pepper.



Above: Ramsons flowers & hedgerow clump.

As Ramsons fades away you should then start finding our second garlic-flavoured plant, **hedge garlic** or **Jack-by-the-Hedge** [*Alliaria petiolata*]. 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. Unlike ramsons, hedge garlic does not lose most of its garlicky flavour when cooked, so it really does make a useful wild flavouring if you like an onion-garlic flavour.



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

[www.wildfoodschool.co.uk](http://www.wildfoodschool.co.uk)

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**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.

**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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