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foraging TIMES marches on...

As we head towards the end of Spring into the early summer months (at least down in Cornwall - other northerly and more chilly parts of the country will make the transition later) the ramsons [*Allium ursinum*] has peaked and the seed pods are already forming, the blackthorn blossom is already fading and the hawthorn is coming into flower bud.

In my part of the world the next herbacious layer (and totally inedible) is beginning to form and will dominate and smother many of my local natural 'supermarkets'. The culprits in particular are bluebells, red campion and stitchwort, all of which will form a thick blanket of foliage over my springtime wild veggie goodies.

Beginning to make an appearance around now might be the leaves of self-heal [*Prunella vulgaris*] (pictured right) which can be another handy wild green (but use in small quantities as the plant is also used herbally) if you can recognise its opposite-facing elliptical leaves early on. Unfortunately self-heal is variable in size - from a couple of inches in height to over 1ft., and there is also a hybrid variety. However, self-heal is so commonly found that I recommend that you get to know its cooking qualities. That said, it just tastes 'green' and by the time the plant reaches flower-bud stage it is only really fit as a survival green, but given enough stewing as a potherb it can even be coaxed into becoming somewhat palatable [with the addition of spices].

In watery and very moist areas you might come across the new shoots of brooklime [*Veronica beccabunga*] (pictured below) which were once commonly used as an ingredient for spring pottages and broths.



ABOVE: Brooklime in flower.



Self-Heal flower spikes are quite distinctive and you'll frequently find the plant in pasture and garden lawns (the latter specimens tend to be quite small).



Self-Heal leaves (above & below) are also characteristic, being placed in opposite pairs.



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!).

If the climate in your part of the country is benign then brooklime is often around for most of the year, although in its later stages of life it gets pretty bitter. Having rather succulent, though small, leaves brooklime has bright blue flowers that bring a touch of colour to streams and babbling brooks.

As a general rule plants become tougher as they put forth their flowering parts, so if you are looking for the best quality greenery then the best time will always be when a plant is young.

Where I am based the leaves and shoots of horseradish [*Cochlearia armoracia*] are beginning to emerge (see below and right). Most folks know of horseradish for the sauce made from its pungent roots (horseradish sauce is a favourite of mine). However, the young leaves may also be eaten and have a very slight peppery taste but with some bitterness. They are best cooked for several minutes in boiling which takes the edge off that bitterness.



ABOVE: Emerging horseradish growth.

In times past one of the things that folks would do with the roots of horseradish was to dry and then powder them - in readiness for sauce-making. If you cook the roots the hot fiery taste is largely eliminated.

One other leaf material which you might like to try at this time are the leaves of the common beech [*Fagus sylvatica*] (pictured right) which are emerging in various lanes around where I live. In fact on one particular beech hedgerow some leaf buds formed around November-December and tried to sprout but got caught by the cold weather. Right now, that same beech hedge is flush with new leaves.

It is the very young leaf material which can be used as food – more of a salad or sandwich filler item than a cooked green. When cooked the leaves tend to get a bit chewy.

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

www.wildfoodschool.co.uk

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Horseradish has a distinctive wavy leaf margin, the leaves sometimes being more than a foot in length when the plant is mature.



Young beech leaves are very soft and have a slight downiness to them.

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.

Below is a seed of the Wych Elm [*Ulmus glabra*] that you should also be finding around this time of year. The little seed embryo has a very slight acid sweetness to it and a little bit of fragrance. They may be used as a salad ingredient – more of a garnishing and flavour accent than a major component.



OTHER WFS SNIPPETS

WFS is involved in a new web TV series called Wild Food Mentor and details will be posted in the next **foraging TIMES** and also on the WFS web pages once the first programme is available.

Each programme will be about 20-25 minutes long and you might call them: 'Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Wild Foods but Never Dared Ask'. Watch this space.

I am also involved in regular wild food talks and walks at The Eden Project in Cornwall - on the first Thursday of each month if you happen to be around.