



No. 8 – September/October 2009

Welcome to **foraging TIMES™** ...and acorn time.

Among the general population there is a widely held belief that acorns are poisonous. Well they are in one respect, and then they are not in another. The main problem is that the acorns we find in this country (from the **English**, or **Pedunculate Oak** / *Quercus robur*, and the **Sessile Oak** / *Q. petraea*) contain large amounts of tannin, and when consumed in large quantity and too frequently this damages your body - in particular it can lead to kidney failure. Just think of a piece of shoe leather and you get the picture of what tannin can do to your body too. Some folks are happy to roast acorns and consume them, but I am uncertain whether roasting neutralises the tannin and makes them harmless. True, the native American Indians roasted acorns from the **White Oak** / *Q. alba* and others, but some of these contain quite little tannin so may not have had a deleterious effect.



ABOVE: Acorn... which, of course, you'll know.

The secret is to de-tox the acorns and make them more fit for human consumption particularly if you are going to use them on a regular basis. I tend to use windfall acorns which are beginning to lose their bright green appearance and on their way to turning yellow-brown, and some are frequently quite pinkish before turning. However, in times of an acorn dearth I sometimes use green ones straight from the tree, and sometimes acorns which are quite dark brown though the latter are frequently disease-ridden and must be discarded.

The processing involved is not difficult, but is time-consuming. However, the upside is having mastered the processing and use of this forgotten foodstuff, you then have the opportunity of really confounding your



ABOVE: The skin or 'hull' of the acorn is slit with a knife ready for removal after softening up in hot water.



ABOVE: Once treated with hot water the hulls soften and expand making shelling easier.

## 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!).

mates when you offer them acorn bread, acorn muffins and biscuits and, wait for it, acorn pasta!



There are various ways of getting at the tannin. My preferred way is to make a slit in the skins with a sharp knife – rolling the hulls across the blade of a knife - and then soaking the acorns in boiling water to soften up the skins which are then peeled off. You can quicken the slicing process by hacking quickly at the acorns on a chopping board but this breaks up the masts with the resulting hull peeling process taking longer. Similarly, bashing acorns in a bin liner leads to small hull shards in the mix and these need to be carefully removed later in the process, again adding time to processing.



Above: acorns de-tanning in hot water.

The next step is to leach out the tannin and this is simply accomplished by soaking in hot water. Your acorns may be kept whole, or ground up in a food blender (use a second-hand one, not your Missus' treasured machine which will be brutalised), the advantage of the latter process being to provide a greater surface area for the leaching water to work on. Simply pour boiling water on the acorns and let them soak for several hours, repeating the process until the leaching water becomes less tea-like, but be warned that the process can take up to two days. To remove the last tannins gently 'boil' (or steep) batches of acorns and when the water browns replace it with another batch of boiling or hot water and repeat until the water only has a sort of pale, jasmine tea-like colour.



ABOVE: De-hulled acorn masts waiting for water treatment.



ABOVE: Dried acorn mush granules.

## BEECH MASTS AS FOOD

Very high in oil content, beech mast edibility is almost as unknown to most folks as are humble, swinish, acorns.



The only drawback is that beech masts are very fiddly to shell and it can be hit and miss in terms of nut quality and content.

The surest way to guarantee success every time you hull a mast is to choose only those masts which appear to have slightly distended hulls (like the one pictured below), indicating the nut is well developed.



The masts can be nibbled on raw, while lightly toasting then really brings out a pungent nutty flavour and crispens up the thin skin surrounding the mast and makes the removal of that easier.





Above: resulting acorn mush can have whole acorn-size pieces or be mashed into a smaller grade material.

The final stage of the process is to drain the mush and dry thoroughly in a cool oven. You can then store the dried acorns - whole pieces or ground into flour with a coffee grinder - in air-tight jars or even freeze the dried end product. The wet mush too can be frozen, once most of the water has been squeezed out. All that remains is to use your hard-won acorns... in bread, biscuits, cookies or whatever, but more of that later.



Above: Acorn and hazelnut muffins.

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

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

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ABOVE: Acorn flour may be bagged and stored in air-tight containers or deep frozen for even longer storage.

## OTHER WFS SNIPPETS

The forthcoming web TV series called **Wild Food Mentor** will be launched soon... Head to the URL: [wildfoodmentor.co.uk](http://wildfoodmentor.co.uk)

For the usual WFS video segments on YouTube either do a text 'search' of Wild Food School on YT to find the relevant videos or go to the WFS website and follow the video links page there.

WFS Occasional Paper #2 on **Indigenous Cooking Techniques** is now ready. Check out the WFS website for more.

ALSO for 2010 there are plans afoot for three full day wild food 'yomps' – collecting, cooking and eating wildfoods gathered along the route. Details of the **CHOMP YOMP™** are on the main website.

**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.