



No. 9 – December, 2009

Welcome to another edition of **foraging TIMES**™ ...

This latest edition is rather behind schedule, and I'm afraid that it is impossible to do a regular monthly issue because of the sheer volume of work that goes on behind the scenes with WFS, and the need to finally set pen to paper and write *THE* definitive guide to the use of wild foods over the coming winter months and year. With nearly seven hundred and fifty historical sources (many hundreds being prime sources) I think it's finally time to start writing. Recently I got my clearance for the British Library Special Collections (the very oldest and most precious - often priceless - written materials) which will open up new avenues and source materials that will feed into the written work and my talks. Anyway, enough of that, let's get on with edible plants...



ABOVE: The bareness of hedgerow habitats in the autumn and winter months can pose a problem for the would-be forager... at least if you are in a cold region.

The first thing that has been transparently obvious in the last couple of months in Cornwall is that **SPRING** is here... and has been since the start of September. In the first couple of weeks of that month cleavers [*Galium aparine*] seedlings started to sprout in the hedgerows, and also the first shoots of navelwort [*Umbilicus rupestris*] and alexanders [*Smyrniolum olusatrum*].

Over at the Eden Project they had primroses in flower in October, and around the end of October there was a single specimen of lesser celandine [*Ranunculus ficaria*] in flower in the lanes round WFS. The latter species is really one of the quintessential spring flowers in my books and yet that one in flower and the sprouting bulbils of many others signal a warm Spring-like season. Three-cornered leek [*Allium triquetrum*] has also been on the march though ramsons [*Allium*



ABOVE: Navelwort – the young leaves are used in salads or may be cooked (though they go rather gloopy when cooked)



ABOVE: Lesser Celandine



ABOVE: A mottled Lesser Celandine leaf.

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!).

ursinum] bulbs are still dormant. All of the sprouting species mentioned had all died back so this really is new growth.

Meanwhile, as we head into what may become a proper cold winter we should start to see several of the winter wild edible appear. Among these are common winter-cress [*Barbarea vulgaris*], salad burnet [*Poterium sanguisorba*], ribwort plantain [*Plantago lanceolata*] and also the previously mentioned goosegrass [*Gallium aparine*], the seedlings of which can grow profusely throughout this lean green period. Both goosegrass and winter-cress contain vitamin C which makes them worthy of attention nutrition-wise.



ABOVE: Young-ish Salad Burnet leaves.

An excellent leaf stock for the winter months is that of the common sorrel [*Rumex acetosa*] (see picture far right) which has a lemony-rhubarb acid taste, and makes a wonderful comfort food when the leaves are wilted like spinach in a little butter and then a sprinkling of raisins and a touch of sugar added to the pan. Make sure your cooking pot is a non-reactive type, and also don't consume sorrel too frequently or in large amounts as it can deleteriously upset your body's mineral balance.



ABOVE: Leaves and early growth of **POISONOUS** *Arum maculatum* which is similar in shape to those of the common sorrel (see far right).

As the common name Winter-cress implies this particular species has a peppery, cress-like, flavour when raw and makes an excellent salad ingredient



ABOVE: Three-Cornered Leek (a sort of wild garlic-chive equivalent, with the leek-like aftertaste).



ABOVE: Three-Cornered Leek leaves and bulbs. The small bulbs may also be used as food but you will need permission to dig them up (unless you happen to own the land).



ABOVE: Cross-section of Three-Cornered Leek leaf.



ABOVE: Winter-Cress leaf.



ABOVE: Common Sorrel leaves. Be sure not to confuse them with the **poisonous** leaves of the Cuckoo-Pint / Lords and Ladies [*Arum maculatum*] which has quite similar shaped leaves. However, you are very unlikely to find *Arum* leaves growing in the winter months [November through February say] though they could surface in late February if the season is unusually warm and triggers early growth.



ABOVE: Salad Burnet leaf.

although it's a little harsh for some folk's palates. Alternatively, cooking the leaves turns the plant into a mild tasting boiled green, and as such presents you with two dietary options when considering what to eat during the winter months. Winter-cress was once grown for food but has largely been forgotten and relegated to 'wild plant' status, although some keen gardeners may still grow it. Winter-cress can be found in damp places such as river banks and roadsides, as well as being a vegetable remnant in older gardens.

Another potential winter-time wild green mentioned above is salad burnet - sometimes also known as *Sanguisorba minor* in old botanical books - the leaves of which have a cucumber-ish tasting flavour, and may be used raw in salads when young or boiled up as a vegetable green when getting older, or put into soups. A perennial, salad burnet is more commonly found in dry, grassy, calcereous soil areas, and is encouraged to put forth new leaves by shearing back old growth, so providing a continuous supply of greens during this lean period.

Our third winter green on the block is ribwort plantain, which is probably familiar to most readers. It is typically found in grassy and waste places but has a particular affinity with damp soils, so it is one that you might expect to find in riverine or marshy locations.

When the leaves are very young - up to about 3 or 4 inches long - the springtime growth makes a quite reasonable boiled veggie green and a good candidate of pottage (that is a stew which includes meat, veggies and some form of thickener such as potatoes or rice). Beyond spring, when the clumps of small ribwort leaves almost look like grass, the plant takes on bitterness and the leaves become stringy, and are really only fit as survival fodder.

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

www.wildfoodschool.co.uk

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ABOVE: Full leaflet of salad burnet.



ABOVE: Clump of ribwort plantain.



ABOVE: The back of ribwort leaves have distinctive ribs which give the plant its name. At this stage the leaves are no use as food – more of survival food.

OTHER WFS SNIPPETS

Details of the **Wild Food Mentor** web TV series / course can be found at: Wildfoodmentor.co.uk

The provisional 2010 course schedule is now available via the WFS website though a number of dates still have to be finalised.

In 2010 there will be three full day wild food 'yomps' – collecting, cooking and eating wild foods gathered along the route. Details of the **CHOMP YOMP™** are on the main website.

There are plans for some **SEAWEED DAYS** also – the whole day revolving round the identification and hands-on use of some of the edible seaweeds found around our shores.

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.

Feel free to pass this or any of the other previous Newsletters on to your friends who have an interest in wild foods.

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.