



Greater Plantain

PLANTAGO MAJOR



HABITAT

Waste ground, waysides, paths, grassy places and lawns.

PARTS USED

Leaves, and leaf tips of older plants where the general leaf material is too stringy.

Plantains come in a variety of shapes and as far as the author is concerned they are generally more of a survival plant than something you would eat out of choice, but they have their uses in the outdoors' kitchen. Plantain leaves get awfully bitter and tough later in the year but it is still possible in May-June to find the younger and reasonably tender green leaves. If you are lucky enough you may find a patch of greater plantains where the young leaves have developed into quite a size - which makes them a worthwhile cabbage-like veggie. However, the bitterness still needs to be removed first.

The young leaves of plantains may be used in stews, boiled like spinach, used as a pot-herb, and even eaten raw if you find them young enough. If you pick larger or older leaves then boiling in a couple of changes of water is the only route to removing the bitter taste. Some greater plantain leaves can reach 5 or more inches in length when growing in ideal conditions. In the greater plantain [*Plantago major*] only use the top 3 inches or so of older leaves, discarding the last inch or so of stem. By this stage in leaf development the leaf ribs are rather stringy. Ribwort plantain [*Plantago lanceolata*] is much less palatable. Even after two 5 minute boilings the 'ribs' seem to retain some bitter taste. And whoever suggested the leaves can generally be eaten raw must have been desperate.

[Taken from 'The Really Wild Food Guide' and 'The Essential Hedgerow and Wayside Cookbook' by Johnny Jumbalaya.]

Consumption of wild plants is at the reader's discretion and own risk. For personal safety do not eat wild plants if you have a medical condition, during pregnancy, or feed to minors.

WHEN TRYING ONE OF THE WILD PLANTS LISTED FOR THE FIRST TIME, TRY TASTING JUST A SMALL AMOUNT OF THE PREPARED PLANT TO CHECK YOUR TOLERANCE. IF YOU HAVE ANY BAD OR ALLERGIC REACTIONS AVOID ANY FURTHER CONSUMPTION. NEVER PUT ANY PLANT INTO YOUR MOUTH UNLESS ABSOLUTELY 100% CERTAIN OF ITS IDENTIFICATION AND EDIBILITY.

PLANTAIN IN SPICY YOGHURT SAUCE

1 handful plantain leaves	1 red chilli OR pinch of chilli powder
1 small onion - sliced	1-2 tbsp. plain yogurt
Butter or oil	Water
Ground cumin, mustard, pepper - pinches	Salt

This recipe revisits greater plantain as the plant can be pretty abundant in the wilderness but needs ways of masking the bitterness. The leaves may be used whole or cut into strips across their width to allow better removal of the bitter constituents. Try also with good king henry leaves.

- Begin by parboiling the plantain leaves for 2 to 3 minutes.
- Drain, refresh with cold water and set aside.
- Fry the onion gently until softened then stir in the spices and cook for another minute or two [if using fresh red chilli gently fry with the onion].
- Take off the heat and stir in the yoghurt.

- Drain the plantain leaves and squeeze out excess water.
- Separate the leaves and add them to the yoghurt sauce.
- Add a pinch of salt and place the pan back on a low heat.
- Cook for another 4 or 5 minutes at a very gentle simmer.
- Serve.

[Recipe extract from 'The *Essential* Hedgerow and Wayside Cookbook'.]

PLANTAIN & CHICKEN

1 chicken breast	1 glass white wine [optional]
Plain flour	Dried thyme - pinch
Butter or oil	1 bay leaf
1 or 2 bacon rashers - roughly chopped	2 cloves
1 small onion - sliced	Salt and pepper
1 handful plantain leaves - young	

Before you lips utter the word *banana*, it should be explained that this recipe uses the leaves of the ground-hugging greater plantain and not the fruiting kind. For this recipe select large leaves [about 4 inches in length] which are still pale green and soft.

- Chop off the stringy stalks to leave 3 or 4 inches of leaf green.
- Gather a bunch of leaves and cut across the leaf width into three or four strips [giving the cooking water more chance to leach out the bitterness], for smaller leaves simply cut in half.
- Drop into boiling water and cook for 3 or 4 minutes but do not allow the leaves to overcook.
- Test for bitterness content - there will be some - then drain the leaves and refresh with cold water.
- Set aside.

- Next, dust the chicken with flour and set aside.
- Fry the bacon in some butter or oil until cooked.
- Remove bacon from pan and set aside.
- Fry the chicken in the residual fat and brown all over, then remove and set aside.

- Gently fry the onion in the same pan until softened then add the fried bacon and stir in.
- Raise the heat slightly and add the wine, herbs, cloves, seasoning and the chicken.
- Allow to just come to the boil then reduce heat to a gentle simmer and cover.
- Cook for about 15 minutes then drain the plantain leaves and add to the pan.
- Stir in gently and cook for about another 10 minutes.
- Serve with potatoes or rice, and reduce or thicken the sauce as required.

[Recipe extract from 'The *Essential* Hedgerow and Wayside Cookbook'.]

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