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Spring Wildcrafting: Going for the Green(s)

Wildcrafting is defined as the gathering of plants (often greens) from their natural or "wild" habitat. Normally this is done for culinary or medicinal purposes. Perhaps it is a throwback to our early ancestors who were foragers as well as planters that we annually scour the outdoors to find nature's bounty. Wild greens have better flavor when gathered early in the spring while they are still young and tender. March is a good month to begin harvesting from nature's "salad bowl" if your taste buds yearn for food that can be a bit piquant in nature.

The cardinal rule to remember when hunting wild greens is to **be certain to know what you are gathering**. If in doubt about the identity of a plant, then pass it by. *Missouri Wildflowers* by Edgar Denison (published by Missouri Department of Conservation) is an excellent reference for the identification of edible wild greens; it also serves as a good field manual for the enjoyment of other members of our wild flora. Also, remember to ask permission first if you go onto someone else's property. Some good places to hunt for wild greens include wood lots, old pastures and fields, along stream banks, and even in your yard.

Although many of these plants grow along roadsides, it is best not to gather them from such places because of the risk they may be contaminated by residue from automobile exhaust. All plants gathered from the wild should be carefully inspected and thoroughly washed with two or more changes of water. The inspection is needed to find and remove grass, insects and other debris. As a final precaution, when eating wild greens for the first time start with small amounts. Allergic reactions to any new food can happen, be it cultivated or from the wild.

The following plants are popular table fare for those who enjoy edible wild greens and are common to Missouri.

Cutleaf Toothwort (*Cardamine concatenate*) - After a long winter without fresh vegetables to consume, pioneer women eagerly awaited the first appearance of toothwort (or crow's foot). It produces low-growing plants found primarily in rich woodlands and wooded slopes. Cutleaf toothwort has five narrow, deeply-lobed leaves that are arranged like the toes on the foot of a crow, hence the common name. Although the leaves of toothwort are edible, the plant's rhizomes are what most wildcrafters covet. They have a spicy, radish-like flavor and can be cut up fresh and added to salads, fermented (to sweeten them) or boiled.

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) - With its familiar jagged leaves, milky stems and yellow sunburst flowers, dandelion is well-known to most of us. Indeed, many lawn owners spend quite a bit of time and effort trying to eradicate this common plant from their lawns. Dandelion greens are especially rich in vitamin A and iron and are best for eating during March and April. The best way to gather this plant is to cut off the whole crown close to the soil, pluck out the flower stem and sort out any "trash". The leaves of this maligned weed can be mixed with other greens to make a salad that is quite a treat.

Continued on page 15

In This Issue

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...continued from page 14

Lambsquarters (*Chenopodium album*) - Often referred to as wild spinach, lambsquarters appears later in the season when most other wild greens have become too mature for consumption. Its alternate common name refers to the fact this plant does taste a lot like spinach and also is high in vitamins and minerals. Its oval-to-lance shaped leaves are light-green above and mealy-white underneath. Lambsquarters is a common plant in gardens, along roadsides, in waste areas or anywhere there is plenty of sunshine and few trees. Young plants can be pinched off just above the ground, cooked and eaten whole. Tender young leaves from older plants can be harvested and eaten all summer long.

Nettle (*Urtica* spp.) - Few people who have ever encountered a patch of stinging nettle will fail to recognize the plant at a later date. In spite of its anti-social behavior (caused by formic acid contained by its fine bristles) nettle is a popular source of springtime table fare. Its leaves are egg-shaped-to-oblong with a heart-like base and toothed margins. Both stem and leaves are covered with the aforementioned bristles. Nettle leaves are best for eating when gathered early in the spring when young (and while wearing gloves). Young leaves lose their stinging properties when boiled and many consider nettle to be tastier than spinach.

Shepherd's-purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*) - This plant derives its common name because its mature, heart-shaped seed pods that look like miniature forms of the pouches once carried by ancient shepherds. It is a winter annual that springs to life from a prostrate rosette of deeply-cut, lance-shaped leaves. Common to fields, country roadsides, pastures and idle land, it has long been used to pep up the taste and flavor of less-savory greens such as lambsquarters. Shepherd's- purse can also be used raw in tossed salads or eaten by itself. Legend has it that old-time raftsmen who floated downstream great flotillas of logs cut from the hills went to great lengths to find this plant along the riverbanks they past by because of its peppery taste.

Watercress (*Nasturtum officinale*) - As one might guess from its name, water cress is an aquatic plant. It often can be found floating on the surface and creeping around the banks of ponds, pasture creeks or cold springs. Water cress has small, bright-green leaves arranged on long slender stems and is at its succulent best from April to June. It has a delightfully pungent taste and has been used for years as a salad or garnish for meat. Early pioneer physicians used water cress in the treatment of scurvy. The latter stems from its high ascorbic acid (vitamin C) content; it also contains significant amounts of vitamin A, iron, calcium and potassium.

Wild lettuce (*Lactuca virosa*) - This plant is common to lowland pastures, cut-over timberlands and along the moist banks of streams. Like its relative the dandelion, it is best for eating in March and early April. Later in the season wild lettuce becomes bitter and unpalatable. It can be identified by its smooth, deeply-lobed, light-green leaves. When broken, leaves and stems of this plant produce a sticky, milk-like sap. Wild lettuce can be mixed with other greens or eaten raw in a wilted lettuce salad.

Winter Cress (*Barbarea vulgaris*) - Commonly called "creasies" in days-of-old, winter (or upland) cress is a superb potherb that has been picked and eaten for generations. It is so popular that commercial canning companies have been known to market it as a canned vegetable. Common in fields, gardens and waste places, winter cress starts from seed late in the summer and develops a rosette of dark green, five-lobed leaves in the fall. It grows remarkable well during warm periods of winter and is ready for harvest and eating in March. Mature winter cress is rather bitter; this problem can be avoided by gathering it when young or mixing it with other greens.

Readers of this article should note that pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) is <u>not</u> included on the preceding list of wild greens even though many old timers relished poke "salid". Because of toxic compounds contained in all parts of this plant we cannot include it on our list of plants acceptable for wildcrafting and human consumption. Therefore, readers are urged to <u>avoid</u> it.

To prepare wild green the "old-fashioned" way simply place them in a sauce pan with a little water, salt to taste and cook until tender. Wild greens should not be overcooked or cooked in a lot of water for fear of losing vitamins and minerals. The bitterness of some greens such as winter cress and dandelion can be offset by cooking them with milder plants. Greens can also be seasoned with bacon drippings or a dash of vinegar or lemon juice for added taste. Wild greens blend well with any menu but (arguably) go best with a "working man's" meal of soup beans, fried potatoes, corn bread and raw onions. Undoubtedly, such a dinner sustained many a mountain farmer of the past during long springtime days of clearing land, walking behind a horse-drawn plow and putting in a new crop.

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April Gardening Calendar

Ornamentals

- **Weeks 1-4:** Study your landscape for gaps that could be nicely filled with bulbs. Mark these spots carefully and make a note to order bulbs next August.
- **Weeks 1-4:** Enjoy, but do not disturb the many wildflowers blooming in woodlands throughout Missouri.
- **Weeks 1-4:** When buying bedding plants, choose compact, bushy plants that have not begun to flower.
- **Weeks 1-3:** When crabapples are in bloom, hardy annuals may be transplanted outdoors.
- **Weeks 1-3:** Fertilize established roses once new growth is 2 inches long. Use a balanced formulation. Begin spraying to control black spot disease.
- **Weeks 1-2:** Examine shrubs for winter injury. Prune all dead and weakened wood.
- **Week 1:** Groundcovers can be mowed to remove winter burn and tidy plants up. Raise mowers to their highest settings. Fertilize and water to encourage rapid regrowth.
- **Week 1:** Shrubs and trees best planted or transplanted in spring, rather than fall, include butterfly bush, dogwood, rose of Sharon, black gum (Nyssa), vitex, red bud, magnolia, tulip poplar, birch, ginkgo, hawthorn and most oaks.
- **Week 1:** Winter mulches should be removed from roses. Complete pruning promptly. Remove only dead wood from climbers at this time. Cultivate lightly, working in some compost or other organic matter.
- **Weeks 2-4:** Look for flowering dogwoods in bloom.
- **Weeks 2-4:** Break off rims from peat pots when transplanting seedlings, otherwise they can act as a wick to draw moisture away from the roots.
- **Weeks 2-3:** Transplant Virginia bluebells (Mertensia virginica) after bloom, but before the foliage disappears.
- **Weeks 3-4:** Do not prune boxwoods before April 15.
- **Weeks 3-4:** Evergreen and deciduous hedges may be sheared. Prune the top narrower than the base so sunlight will reach the lower limbs.
- **Weeks 3-4:** Oaks and hickories bloom.
- **Weeks 3-4:** Easter lilies past blooming can be planted outdoors. Set the bulbs 2 to 3 inches deeper than they grew in the pot. Mulch well if frost occurs.
- **Weeks 3-4:** Apply controls for holly leaf miner when the new leaves are just beginning to grow.
- **Weeks 3-4:** Balloon flower (Platycodon), hardy hibiscus, gasplant (Dictamnus albus) and some lilies are slow starters in the spring garden. Cultivate carefully to avoid injury to these tardy growers.
- **Week 4:** Prune spring flowering ornamentals after they finish blooming.
- **Week 4:** Begin planting out summer bulbs such as caladiums, gladioli and acidanthera at 2 week intervals.

Lawns

- **Weeks 1-4:** Start mowing cool season grasses at recommended heights. For complete details, refer to University Extension Guide #6705, Cool Season Grasses.
- **Weeks 1-2:** Topdress low spots and finish overseeding thin or bare patches.
- **Weeks 1-2:** Aerate turf if thatch is heavy or if soil is compacted.
- **Weeks 1-2:** Apply crabgrass preventers before April 15. Do not apply to areas that will be seeded.

Vegetables

- **Weeks 1-3:** Finish transplanting broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, and cauliflower plants into the garden. High phosphorous fertilizers help get transplants off to a quick start.
- **Weeks 1-2:** Plants started indoors should be hardened off outdoors in cold frames before being transplanted into the garden.
- **Weeks 1-2:** Start cucumber, cantaloupe, summer squash, and watermelon seeds indoors in peat pots.
- **Weeks 1-2:** Finish sowing seeds of all cool-season vegetables not yet planted.
- **Weeks 1-2:** Plastic films can be used to preheat the soil where warm season vegetables are to be grown.

April Gardening Calendar

Vegetables *(contd.)*

- **Weeks 1-2:** Asparagus and rhubarb harvests begin.
- **Weeks 2-4:** Handpick and destroy asparagus beetles.
- **Weeks 2-4:** Keep your hoe sharp! Don't allow weeds to get an early start in your garden.
- **Weeks 2-4:** Flower stalks should be removed from rhubarb plants, if they develop.
- **Weeks 2-4:** Try an early sowing of warm-season crops such as green beans, summer squash, sweet corn, New Zealand spinach and cucumbers.
- **Weeks 2-3:** Thin out crowded seedlings from early plantings of cool season crops such as beets, carrots, lettuce, onions and radish.
- **Weeks 2-3:** Sow seeds of luffa and hard-shell gourds indoors in peat pots. Soak seeds overnight before planting.
- **Weeks 2-3:** Make succession sowings of cool-season crops.
- **Weeks 3-4:** Begin planting lima beans, cucumbers, melons, okra and watermelons.
- **Weeks 3-4:** Begin setting out transplants of tomatoes, eggplants, peppers and sweet potatoes.

Fruits

- **Weeks 1-4:** Blemish-free fruits unmarred by insect or disease injury can rarely be produced without relying on regular applications of insecticides and fungicides For special information, consult University Extension Guide Sheet #G6010, Home Fruit Spray Schedule.
- **Weeks 1-2:** Wooden clothespins make useful spreaders for training young fruits limbs. Place pins between the trunk and branch to force limbs outward at a 60 degree angle from the trunk.
- **Weeks 1-2:** A white interior latex paint may be brushed on the trunks of newly planted fruit trees to prevent sunburn. This will gradually weather off in time.
- **Weeks 1-2:** Stink bugs and tarnished plant bugs become active on peaches.
- **Weeks 1-2:** Leaf rollers are active on apple trees. Control as needed.
- **Weeks 1-2:** Prune peaches and nectarines now.
- **Week 1:** Plant bare-root or potted fruit trees as soon as the soil can be worked.
- **Week 1:** Remove tree wraps from fruit trees now.
- **Weeks 2-4:** Protect bees and other pollinating insects. Do not spray insecticides on fruit trees that are blooming.
- **Week 2:** Destroy or prune off webs of eastern tent caterpillars. "B.t." (Dipel) is a safe biological spray.
- **Weeks 3-4:** Orange, jelly-like galls on cedar trees spread rust diseases to apples, crabapples and hawthorns.
- **Weeks 3-4:** Begin sprays for fire-blight susceptible apples and pears using an agricultural streptomycin.
- **Week 4:** Spider mites and codling moths become active on apples.

Miscellaneous

- **Weeks 1-2:** Termites begin swarming. Termites can be distinguished from ants by their thick waists and straight antennae. Ants have slender waists and elbowed antennae.
- **Weeks 1-2:** Look for morel mushrooms when lilacs bloom and the forest floor turns green.
- **Week 1:** Mount a rain gauge on a post near the garden to keep track of precipitation so you can tell when to water. Most gardens need about 1 inch of rain per week between April and September.
- **Weeks 2-4:** Mole young are born in chambers deep underground.
- **Weeks 3-4:** Honeybees are swarming. Notify a local beekeeper to find a new home for these beneficial insects.
- **Week 4:** Soaker hoses and drip irrigation systems help you save water and money.
- **Week 4:** Hummingbirds return from their winter home in Central America.
- **Week 4:** Wasp and hornet queens begin nesting.

Gardening Calendar supplied by the staff of the William T. Kemper Center for Home Gardening located at the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis, Missouri. (www.GardeningHelp.org)