

Community Horticulture Fact Sheet #73A Edible Wild Plants

Did you know that a large percentage of wild plants growing in Western Washington are edible? They may not all be tasty or particularly flavorful, but many are quite nutritious. Tubers, leaves, flowers and stems of many plants are edible. Some can be eaten raw and others are best boiled, roasted, or used in soups or tea.

Wild plants were critical to the survival of Native Americans. They used them in all aspects of their daily lives – for food, medicine and ceremony. Pioneers also used wild plants to balance their diets and relied on them heavily in the spring to relieve the monotony of dried meat, fish and bread.

Basic rules of Wild Food Collection:

- **Know what you are picking**
- **Collect only what you can positively identify as edible**
- **Harvest only plants that look healthy in areas uncontaminated by pesticides**
- **Clean and prepare wild foods like you do cultivated crops**
- **Eat only small quantities when first trying an edible plant**
- **Get property owners permission before gathering wild foods**
- **Never over-harvest. Take only what you can use and use what you take.**

BERRIES and NUTS

Berries are the most popular wild edibles. Fact sheet #73B gives more information about the wild fruit of our region. We have one edible nut in Western Washington.

Hazelnut (*Corylus sp.*): These large bushes, common in open woods have delicious nuts

in clusters of 2-3. They were one of the only seeds eaten by the native people of Puget Sound and were highly prized. Hazelnut thickets were periodically burned in some areas to enhance nut production.

OTHER COMMON EDIBLE PLANTS

Some of these plants are Native (N) and others were introduced (I).

Cattail (*Typha latifolia*): Found along shores of ponds and shallow lakes in wet areas. The peeled shoots (harvest when about 2 ft. tall) are starchy and may be eaten raw if tender enough (and if from safe water), or boiled. Rhizomes can be boiled or roasted (the starchy, center core is the edible part). Female flowers wrapped in their husk can be boiled and eaten like corn. Pollen is collected when in bloom and made into flat cakes or mixed with flour for bread. **(N)**

Chickweed(*Stellaria media*): Found in open grassy and disturbed areas. Young stems and leaves are boiled as greens. Can also be used raw in salads, sandwiches or stir-fried. **(I)**

Clover (*Trifolium spp.*): Found in open grassy areas. Roots and rhizomes may be boiled or roasted and eaten as a starchy vegetable. Dry flower heads make a good tea. **(N & I)**

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*): Found everywhere except dense woodland. Young greens may be eaten raw in salads or boiled as spinach. Harvest where plants are growing in moist, rich soil to minimize bitterness. Young roots may be boiled and/or fried and older roots dried, roasted & ground for a coffee substitute. **(I)**

Fireweed (*Epilobium angustifolium*): Found in burned or logged areas. Tender leaves and young shoots are eaten raw, boiled or steamed. **(N)**

Japanese Knotweed (*Polygonum cuspidatum*): Big, invasive weedy plant with stems that look like bamboo, but leaves are much broader than true bamboo. New shoots in early spring can be cooked like asparagus or older stalks peeled & made into pies like rhubarb. Should not be eaten in quantity as it contains oxalic acid, which interferes with calcium absorption. **(I)**

Lamb's Quarters (*Chenopodium album*): This delicious close relative of garden spinach is a common garden weed and also is found in waste places like vacant lots. Young shoots and leaves are very tender and succulent. Used raw in salads, steamed or boiled. **(I)**

Miner's Lettuce (*Montia/Claytonia spp.*) Very plentiful in open woodlands, it's quite tasty and makes a nutritious salad. Can also be boiled, steamed or stir-fried. **(N)**

Nettles (*Urtica spp.*): Found in moist shady places. Young leaves and stems are eaten boiled like spinach. Young, pinkish, underground shoots are also good cooked. **(N)**

Plantain (broadleaf and narrowleaf) (*Plantago spp.*): Common in lawns and disturbed areas. Tender, young leaves are good in salads, steamed and in creamed soup. If the leaves are too old, the stringy veins will have to be removed. Plantain seeds can be dried, ground and used like flour. **(I)**

Dock (several species) (*Rumex spp.*): This plant is plentiful in areas along streams and in open fields. Young leaves, make excellent cooked greens. **(N some)**

Sheep Sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*): This plant is found quite commonly in the acid soils

of western Oregon and Washington. It is very flavorful in a salad. Contains oxalic acid, so use sparingly. **(I)**

Thistles (*Cirsium spp.*): Found in open meadows and clearings. Young plant stalks make good greens. Cut them near the base, peel and boil. The root is peeled and eaten raw, boiled or roasted. **(N some)**

Violets (*Viola spp.*): Found in damp shady places. Leaves and blossoms make good salad materials. They can be added to soup or eaten as cooked greens. **(N & I)**

Watercress (*Nasturtium officinale*): Found in wet areas. Used as a salad or garnish if from safe waters. **(I)**

REFERENCES:

For better identification and more detailed knowledge, check your library or bookstore for illustrated books including the following:

Plants of the Pacific North Coast by Jim Pojar and Andy MacKinnon

Discovering Wild Plants – Alaska, Western Canada, the Northwest by Janice J. Schofield

Wild Harvest by Terry Domico

Why Wild Edibles by Russ Mohny

Stalking the Wild Asparagus by Euell Gibbons
Common and Useful Edible Plants of the West,
by Muriel Sweet

Edible Wild Plants – A North American Field Guide by Elias and Dykeman

Edible Wild Plant & Useful Herbs by Jim Meuninck

Food Plants of Coastal First Peoples by Nancy Turner

Guide to Common Edible Plants of British Columbia, by A. F. Szczawinski and George A. Hardy

Last two available from Publications, Royal British Columbia Museum, 675 Belleville St., Victoria, B.C. V8V 1X4.