

Edible Weeds

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Edible weeds can spice up your meals—and the price is right!

Frustrated with dandelions in your lawn or that patch of persistent nettles by the shed? Get even by eating them! Some common weeds are nutritious, delicious, and may have traditional medicinal properties. However, you should avoid collecting weeds for consumption by the roadside as they may contain toxins from vehicle traffic, asphalt, or even herbicide or pesticide residue. Also, keep in mind the chemicals you use on your own lawn if you plan to eat some of your weeds.

Let's take a walk and track down some of these edible troublemakers.

Dandelions

Dandelion greens are the easiest weeds to incorporate into meals. These weeds are easily identifiable by their basal rosette pattern of leaf formation, hollow stems, and deeply “toothed” leaves. (The word “dandelion” comes from a French term, meaning “toothed.”) While all parts of the dandelion are edible, the greens in particular are high in vitamins A and C, and iron. Young greens may be used as a flavorful addition to a green salad. Older greens may be steamed or stir-fried as you would spinach or kale. The bitterness may be remedied by boiling the greens in a couple changes of water or cooking them with sweeter vegetables, such as parsnips. Even dandelion flowers can be made into wine. Both the flowers and the roots can be cooked as a vegetable.



Eat your veggies, boys. These young men have developed a taste for dandelions (left) and shotweed (right), one of the most prolific weeds in the garden.

Photo by Jason Miller

Nettles

Incorporating stinging nettles into your meals requires a little care and preparation. Be sure to wear gloves while harvesting the leaves. Leaves from young plants taste the best, but you may also harvest the top leaves on older plants. Stinging nettles must be cooked, because they are covered with hairs that will irritate your lips and mouth! Cook nettles until they are completely wilted—a quick stir-fry will not remove those irritating hairs. Once cooked, nettles may be incorporated into dishes as you would spinach. Try them in pasta dishes, quiches, omelets, frittatas and soups. Recipes using nettles are easily available on the Internet.

Cattails

During the last week in June, snap off the flower heads and steam for seven minutes. Add butter, salt and pepper, and eat around the stem like you would corn on the cob (the two tastes are similar). Cattails can be blanched and frozen.

Japanese Knotweed

You can break off the new shoots and the top four inches of the large plant and use them like asparagus. Sauté them in olive oil and crack a little pepper and salt over them. It's not a good idea to grow this stuff on purpose; it's a noxious weed. Japanese knotweed has been compared to rhubarb and can be used in a similar fashion.

Purslane

This plant grows fast in the warmth of the summer. It is used by Salish tribes here for food. It has one of the highest concentrations of Omega 3 fatty acids, five times the amount found in spinach. Cold, it is great in sandwiches and salads. Cooked, its nutritional benefits are comparable to okra. The stems are high in vitamin C.



Shotweed—a.k.a. little bittercress—is one of the more edible and nutritious weeds. Photo by Jason Miller

Shotweed

The bane of most gardeners' existence, shotweed—a.k.a. little bittercress—is that seemingly ever-present weed whose seed pods seem to be spring-loaded: Touch them lightly and they flip seeds everywhere. The good news is, shotweed is edible and very nutritious. Add it to salads, for starters.

Sheep's Sorrel

This weed has tremendous health benefits. It is one of the plants in the Essiac formula (a recipe purported to aid cancer sufferers) or Native American Camas Prairie tea. Sorrel is great in soups, salads, sauces and egg dishes. It has a sour snap that adds a zing to meals.

Burdock Root

This is another Essiac ingredient that can be washed, scraped and cooked or put in stir-fries. Small seedlings can be scrubbed and used in salads. You can also use it to make pie.

Chickweed

Clip it and steam the greens or use it fresh in salads. It is good for your skin and blood.

Lambsquarters

This annual weed can be cooked or used raw in salads. The seeds can be cooked for hot cereal.

Plantain

Remove the ribs and eat it as steamed greens or fresh in salads. The seeds are also edible. Plantain is 30 percent mucilage; its roughage is soothing to the intestines.

Johnny-Jump-Up

Add to salads for color and zest.

Chicory

A coffee substitute can be made by combining this weed with dandelion roots. Scrub everything well and cut the weeds into pieces, then dehydrate the pieces. Roast in a 250-degree oven for 30 to 40 minutes, cool, then grind in a coffee grinder. Brew it just like coffee—without the caffeine.

Grass

No kidding! During the 1930s, Dr. Charles Schnabel, a Kansas City food chemist, would get up at 4:00 a.m. every day and cut grass. He would dry it over the heat registers in his house and add it to his family's food for nutrition. In this fashion, he fed eight children for 11 years, and reported they had no cavities and were never sick, except for a few common childhood diseases. Food for thought.

Armed with this information, you will never have to worry about the prices of nutritious vegetables when you're in a pinch. Just take a little walk. Eating your edible weeds probably will not result in a weed-free lawn or landscape, but you may develop a new appreciation for them after trying them in a few meals.



This soup was prepared with chickweed for a change.

Photo by Bobbi Gustafson

Weed-harvesting Tips

To ensure a safe and enjoyable foray into foraging, follow these tidbits of advice.

- Always get permission before picking plants on any property that isn't yours.
- Never eat a plant unless you have a positive identification for it and know for sure which parts are edible. Some plants are very poisonous; some have parts that are poisonous. The Internet is a great tool to research individual plants.
- Never harvest plants that have been exposed to herbicides or pesticides, road salt, asphalt runoff or pet waste.
- Resist the urge to immediately replace all the greens in your diet with weeds! Instead, gradually add weeds to your meals.
- If you are on medication or pregnant, take the time to carefully research each plant so that the herbs you use will be safe for you and compatible with any medications you may be taking.