



## BRAMBLES

(*Rubus fruticosus*) Blackberries are among the most popular forage crops. The berries can be used raw or cooked

The largest garden at the Hampton Court Palace Flower Show features edible plants found in the wild. **Simon Garbutt** is an enthusiastic advocate of foraging, but advises us to take care with identification and always seek landowners' permission

**SOMETHING FOR NOTHING** is always an attractive idea, but for me, collecting free, wild foods also conjures up vivid memories. From childhood I relished exploring the countryside, particularly in autumn, when we would go 'brambling', returning with hands and faces stained purple.

I also fondly remember plump raspberries that fell readily into cupped hands; tiny, intensely flavoured, scarlet wild strawberries and refreshing wood sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*), wonderfully astringent; and searching among springy, scratchy cushions of honey-scented heather on heaths for small, plump, bloomy-black bilberries.

Foraging must surely be mankind's oldest activity, for together with hunting it fed our ancestors long before the adoption of farming, and carried on alongside it. Only since the industrial revolution have most people forgotten the bounty of wild foods.

### An open-air classroom

So when, as a hard-up student in the early 1970s, I read Richard Mabey's *Food for Free* about wild food I was hooked. I eagerly experimented with thick slices of giant puffball, fried in bacon fat, and chickweed (*Stellaria media*: Mabey recommended simmering it gently for 10 minutes, but it was stringy; I much prefer the raw leaves). I made nettle soup, and ate garlicky Jack-by-the-hedge raw, as well as the young leaves of beech and lime. Sometimes I hunted for fungi in the woods near Richmond Park, but not having a good field guide I never risked eating anything that I found.

Eyebrows were raised at some of Richard Mabey's suggestions largely because, at the time, as a nation we were rather less adventurous in our tastes. Since then, cheaper foreign travel, and restaurant menus featuring eclectic fusions of world cuisines, have helped to better educate our palates.

Later, television series and recipe books by Antonio Carluccio and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall popularised foraging to the extent that wild-sourced seasonal vegetables and herbs are now used by many top chefs.

So popular have some wild ingredients

## WILD ROSE

(*Rosa canina*) Use petals for garnish, salads, jelly or syrup; skin of hips in syrup or soup

SIMON GARBUTT



### Seasonality and safety

There are significant seasonal peaks and troughs to wild foods. What can be collected varies in its availability – and palatability – week by week. Many wild crops are best eaten as fresh as possible, but some can be preserved as jams, jellies or pickles, or candied, dried or frozen. While the range of tasty, exciting wild foods is enormous (Miles Irving's handbook covers around 300 species), newcomers to foraging are best advised to take a cautious, systematic approach. Or, ideally, consult someone more experienced – several organisations now offer courses and foraging trips with mentors, as well as chefs demonstrating how to cook the results.

Never eat any plant or fungus unless you are certain that you have identified it precisely. Double-check, and rule out, any poisonous species that could ►

RHSSHOWS

## ▽ SWEET CICELY

(*Myrrhis odorata*) Use young leaves, stems and green seeds in salads; dry seeds as spice; roots as root vegetable or candied



## ◁ DANDELION

(*Taraxacum officinale*) Has many uses and is easy to find. Blanched leaves can be used in salads or as a leafy vegetable; flowers for wine and salads; roots as a vegetable, or dried and ground as a coffee substitute

## ▽ RAMSONS

(*Allium ursinum*) Also known as wild garlic, it has a distinctive garlic-like scent and flavour. Use the leaves in salads, flowers as garnish and bulbs an alternative to garlic or shallots



# FORAGING – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

## Foraging legally

- It is illegal to collect plants or fungi from any Site of Special Scientific Interest or National Nature Reserve – this now includes many miles of roadside verges.
- Certain plants are protected under Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (see [www.ukwildlife.com](http://www.ukwildlife.com)). These may not be picked, uprooted or destroyed (fortunately only a few UK rarities are in fact edible).
- It is illegal to dig or uproot any plant, however common, without the landowner's permission.

## Foraging ethically, and safely

- Only harvest a wild plant if it is plentiful, and only collect from places where it is unlikely to have been sprayed with pesticides, been soiled by animals, or come in contact with other pollutants.
- Avoid foraging along busy roadsides, and remember some plants can absorb toxins from polluted soil. Treat plants from former industrial and other brownfield sites with caution.
- Only take a few leaves or flowers from each individual plant and do not uproot them (unless you are trying to control weeds such as dandelions, thistles or ground elder).
- When gathering roots, take only a few plants from a large group. It is illegal to uproot plants without the landowner's permission, so forage roots from your own land or find a friendly landowner.
- Be especially careful to identify every piece of root by the leaves it has produced – it is easy to confuse many species without leaves.
- The first time you eat any new food, only try a small amount as it may conceivably trigger an allergic reaction. Of course, almost any food can be toxic in excess, so do not consume your wild harvests in large quantities, or too often.
- Aquatic and marginal plants may harbour an unpleasant parasite: liver fluke. Do not eat these species raw unless you know them to be safe.
- Riverside habitats can also harbour Weil's disease, which is spread by rat urine. Wearing gloves helps to prevent waterborne infections.
- Seashores may be polluted by sewage, so check their water quality if foraging nearby (the cleanest, 'Blue Flag' beaches are listed at [www.keepbritain tidy.org](http://www.keepbritain tidy.org)).



SIMON GARBUIT



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## ELDER

(*Sambucus nigra*) Its useful flowers can be turned into fritters, delicate wines or cordials and preserves. Berries make excellent sauces (good with stewed apples), jellies and wines, but do not eat them raw

possibly be confused with it. Common names can be misleading and may be locally applied to unrelated plants, so always use a reliable, up-to-date field guide. Few wild species are deadly poisonous, but Britain does have some. For example, many members of the carrot family (*Apiaceae*, formerly *Umbelliferae*) are extremely good to eat, but others, including hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), cowbane (*Cicuta virosa*) and hemlock water dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*), are highly poisonous, and look similar. Take great care with identifying all umbellifers, especially those growing near water. The fungus *Amanita phalloides* is aptly known as the death cap as half a

cap (30g/1oz) is enough to kill. Arm yourself with a reliable field guide (and perhaps the HMSO's *Poisonous Plants & Fungi*, to be on the safe side) and get to know just one or two species at a time really well. (For more on the legality and ethics of foraging, see box, left). Among the crops and groups worth foraging for are the following: ● **Fungi:** giant puff-balls (*Langermannia gigantea*, syn. *Lycoperdon giganteum*) are good to eat when full size but still white-fleshed. Field mushrooms and similar horse mushrooms (*Agaricus campestris* and *A. arvensis*) are excellent, but be sure of their identity. Shaggy inkcaps (*Coprinus comatus*) are easy to identify



DK IMAGES / SARAH COUTTE

## HORSERADISH

(*Armoracia rusticana*) Grated roots are used as a familiar, pungent condiment or – remarkably – in ice cream. Flowers and leaves taste pleasantly of cabbage

and good while young, before their gills darken; older specimens liquefy, so do not store. 'Fungus forays' with experienced guides are a good way of learning to identify mushrooms. ● **Flowers:** cowslips (*Primula veris*) and primroses (*P. vulgaris*) can be served in salads; these and sweet violets (*Viola odorata*) can be used for garnish or candied. Cowslips and primroses can also make wine, but large quantities are needed so these are best grown specially for the purpose. ● **Fruits and nuts:** fruit of bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*), bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and wild strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*) can all be enjoyed raw or cooked,

## ▽ SEA BEET

(*Beta vulgaris* subsp. *maritima*) The wild parent of beetroot. Leaves can be blanched, boiled or steamed; boil roots as a vegetable



STEVE TREWHELLA / FLEA



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## MARSH SAMPHIRE

(*Salicornia* species) Lightly boil stems for a crunchy, asparagus-like vegetable

(mostly *Cirsium* species), nettles (*Urtica dioica*), goosegrass (*Galium aparine*) and hairy bittercress (*Cardamine hirsuta*). Although it will never replace the weekly supermarket shop, foraging, carried out sensibly and sensitively, involves a minimum of food miles and, what's more, it can expand your taste horizons to encompass an unexpected wealth of flavours and textures. ■

Simon Garbutt is a freelance photographer and writer

- i Further reading** ● *The Forager Handbook*, by Miles Irving, Ebury Press, 2009, £30 ISBN 9780091913632. ● *Food for Free*, by Richard Mabey, Harper Collins, 2007, £12.99 ISBN 9780007247684 ● *Hedgerow (River Cottage Handbook No. 7)*, by John Wright, Bloomsbury, 2010, £14.99 ISBN 9781408801857 ● *Antonio Carluccio Goes Wild*, by Antonio Carluccio (out of print)

**@** For more comments from regular foragers visit 'July 2011' at [www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden](http://www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden)

## EDIBLES AT HAMPTON COURT PALACE

The centrepiece of this year's Hampton Court Palace Flower Show, the RHS Edible Garden, designed by Anita Foy and Jon Wheatley, will have a 'food for free' section. This will contain some of the species that can be foraged from the wild in the UK, including brambles, hazel, elder and hawthorn. The section will be next to a naturalistic pond fringed with willow and reeds. More formal sections of the garden will include a fruit and nut orchard; a fruit, flower and vegetable garden; a vineyard; and a tropical house.

**\* Hampton Court Palace Flower Show, 5–10 July. To book tickets, or for show information, visit: [www.rhs.org.uk/hamptoncourt](http://www.rhs.org.uk/hamptoncourt); 0844 338 7539**



HELEN THOMAS