

## Wild Edibles

by Heather Bryant, Extension Educator, Agricultural Resources

Last month, I attended Valley Food and Farm's annual Flavors of the Valley Event. Flavors of the Valley is a trade show for local food enthusiasts. Visitors to this event view booths where farmers and restaurateurs have set out samples of their products. Participants learn about organizations that focus on local foods or agriculture. One of the booths was set up by the Upper Valley Food Coop and they were offering samples of a homemade spring tonic made from dandelion greens, vinegar and maple syrup that they had mixed in a bicycle powered blender. It was surprisingly good and got me thinking about dandelions and other wild edible plants that come with spring and summer.

Dandelion greens are surprisingly good to eat (or drink as I did at the Upper Valley Food Coop booth) as long as you harvest them before they start to flower. They are also healthy for you. According to the University of Maine, 3.5 oz of dandelion greens boiled, with the water changed once to mellow the flavor, contain 33 calories, 0.6 grams of fat, and 2 grams of protein along with iron and Vitamins A and C. If you missed the window or you know the dandelions in your yard have been fertilized or sprayed with pesticides, you can buy them instead.

Fiddleheads are another wild edible plant you can find in the spring. I've also seen them at the Littleton Coop if you don't trust your plant id skills. They are the young shoots of the elephant fern. One caveat with fiddleheads is that the Center for Disease Control has investigated reports of food-borne illness connected with lightly cooked fiddleheads. While the results were inconclusive, they do recommend boiling fiddleheads for at least 10 minutes before eating them.

Of course spring and summer are also a good time for collecting wild mushrooms, but as mushrooms can be a challenge to identify, it's best to find an expert to teach you how to find them or buy them in a store. My favorite wild mushroom is called chicken of the woods, and it smells just like chicken when you sauté it. It tastes very much like chicken as well.

As much as I like chicken of the woods, I think lambs quarters are my favorite wild edible as they are a common summertime weed in the garden and eating them provides a certain sense of revenge, even though you can't eat enough of them to make a difference. Lambs quarters make a very nice pesto and are a close relative to the quinoa plant. The young leaves at the top of the plant are the ones you want and can be prepared the same way you prepare more traditional pesto or cooked greens.

Purslane is the other major edible summertime weed. It is cooked the way you would spinach or you can eat it raw if you don't mind the slimy texture. In the case of purslane the entire plant is edible or if you prefer you can just eat the leaves.

For most of us collecting and eating wild edibles is just a fun way to celebrate the season or an old family tradition, but for past generations spring, and the vitamin packed greens that come with it, was likely a welcome change from the stored foods that would have certainly become boring and probably scarce or in poor condition after a long winter. So enjoy your seasonal treats and raise a glass of dandelion tonic to the coming (finally) of spring and summer.

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