Signs of Spring

“*Sarviceberry’s* what we call it,” he explained, “as you can see it’s one of the first plants to flower come spring. Up here in the hills of West Virginia, folks that died in the cold of winter weren't buried until the ground warmed up enough. When the proper time for their funeral ‘sarvices’ arrived, these were the flowers they used.”

Up North we call this small tree Juneberry or Serviceberry (botanical name *Amelanchier arborea*, an apparently close western relative *Amelanchier alnifolia*, known as “Saskatoons”). Another popular name is Shadbush, since their masses of aromatic, white flowers blossom at the time when shad ascend our New England rivers to spawn.

Having fished for shad in the lower reaches of the Connecticut River, I can agree that this is a time worth noting. Funny how tying a plant's name to a special event trains the mind to watch for its appearance. I seldom miss seeing “Sarviceberry” when its bright white flowers light up our drab spring woods.

These Amelanchiers have long been recognized as an important, early-ripening fruit for birds and other wildlife. Native Americans and early settlers once pounded the dried fruits into a pemmican high in Vitamin C.

Since the 1950s, breeding programs in western Canada have sought to enhance the best attributes of selected wild plants. Now grown as a commercial crop in place of blueberries (to which they bear some physical resemblance), the new varieties have produced some impressively high yields. The fruits have an interesting flavor, though their seeds make them less desirable for fresh eating than blueberries.

Their extreme winter-hardiness, wide adaptability to different soils/conditions, along with their long life and ornamental value make Amelanchiers worth considering for New Hampshire gardens and home landscapes.

Yet another sign of spring: the sudden appearance of wild-food gatherers, buckets in hand, heading into a greening meadow or searching along tree-lined streams. I can't help but wonder if our passing tourists, speeding by in a hurry to get to some destination or other, are thinking, “What are those people up to?”

Why, collecting fiddleheads! These well-known culinary delicacies, start appearing ready for harvest sometime in early to mid-April. The only edible fiddlehead comes from the Ostrich Fern, *Matteuccia struthiopteris*.

Fiddleheads may well be one of the state foods of Maine (right up there with lobster). They're so much esteemed that Maine Extension publishes information about their proper gathering, cleaning and cooking. Correctly identifying the edible ostrich fern fiddlehead is essential. Quoting the Maine bulletin:

> “In the spring, the ostrich fern's distinctive ‘fiddleheads,’ the young, coiled fern leaves about an inch in diameter, are mostly green, but have brown scales. Nearly all ferns have fiddleheads, but the ostrich fern's are unlike any other. These fiddleheads have a paper-dry, parchment-like sheath that usually has

started to peel. Most other fern fiddlehead sheaths are fuzzy or wooly."

The fact sheet contains this warning: *The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has investigated a number of outbreaks of food-borne illness associated with fiddleheads. The implicated ferns were eaten either raw or lightly cooked (sautéed, parboiled or microwaved)…. Although a toxin has not been identified in the fiddleheads of the ostrich fern, the findings of this investigation suggest that you should cook fiddleheads thoroughly before eating (boil them for at least 10 minutes).*

Cankerwort, *swine's snout*, *blowball*, *pisenlit*—all these strange names have been used to identify that wild green most of us call the dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale*. After a long winter of bland diets, dandelions were a welcome addition (of variety and vitamins) to springtime meals in earlier days. The plant serves the same purpose for many rural people today.

A native of Eurasia, the dandelion may have been intentionally introduced into America for its
nutritional and medicinal value. In fact, the *officinale* in its species name comes from a Latin root that originally meant "workshop," but gradually evolved to mean "pharmacy," or any use for the practice of medicine. .

I can't emphasize strongly enough the importance of precise identification of any wild plant you're gathering for use as a food, beverage, or home remedy. Most of us are a generation or two removed from the country folk with long experience of wild food-gathering. Mistaking a poisonous plant for a useful one can have serious health consequences. Some plant families contain many look-alikes, some of which are edible and others that are deadly.

To begin learning, check your local library for reference materials—field guides and botanical keys, or buy a couple of good field guides. A couple of volumes from the Peterson Field Guide Series could get you started. Try ***A Field Guide to Edible Wild Plants*** and *A Field Guide to Medicinal Plants and Herbs Of Eastern and Central North America***.** For information and recipes, check out Maine Extension's online fact sheet ***Edible Wild Greens in Maine***.

A final note: Remember, land management factors, such as heavy fertilization (which might cause nearby wild plants to have an excess of nitrates in their leaves), or pesticide residues can also affect the safety of plants growing in a particular location. Know the history of the land you forage from.

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