

Hunt, Gather, Cook: Finding the Forgotten Feast: A Cookbook

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From field, forest, and stream to table, award-winning journalist Hank Shaw explores the forgotten art of foraging.

If there is a frontier beyond organic, local and seasonal, beyond farmers' markets and grass-def meat, it's hunting, fishing and foraging your own food. A lifelong angler and forager who became a hunter late in life, Hank Shaw is dedicated to finding a place on the table for the myriad overlooked and underutilized wild foods that are there for the taking -- if you know how to find them.

In Hunt, Gather, Cook, he shares his experiences both in the field and in the kitchen, as well as his extensive knowledge of North America's edible flora and fauna. Hank provides a user-friendly, food-oriented introduction to tracking down and cooking everything from prickly pears, to grouper to snowshoe hares.

Hank Shaw is a former chef, food writer, and the founder of the James Beard Award nominated food blog Hunter Angler Gardener Cook. He lives in Orangevale, California.

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WILD GREEN'S ARE EVERYWHERE

The wonderful thing about wild greens is that they're all around us. Everywhere. Look out the window. I bet you're looking at some now. Even in a big city or a desert. And even in winter. That's why your first forays into foraging ought to begin at home, with something like dandelions or other wild greens. No treks through the uncharted wilderness, no danger. Not yet.

When I say "wild greens," I mean the leaves or stalk of a plant that is best eaten cooked. This separates it in my mental calculus from salad greens both wild and domestic. Some plants, such as dandelions, fit into both camps, depending on the time of year.

Why bother gathering greens when you can just buy them? First off, it's fun. There's a certain "wow" factor when you serve guests an elegant dish of, say, nettle pasta, or empanadas filled with cheese and lamb's-quarters, or dolmades made with mallow leaves instead of grape leaves. Wild greens taste better, too. They tend to be more substantial, stronger in flavor, and more vibrant.

The reason, I think, is nutrition. If Popeye had eaten amaranth or lamb's-quarters instead of spinach, he'd have been even tougher. Spinach is reasonably high in iron, vitamin A, and several other nutrients. But amaranth and lamb's-quarters blow it out of the water, and the vitamin content of nettles is legendary. Many of these greens have traditionally been eaten as a "tonic" in early spring, before new crops are ready and after the winter's storage food has become wan and sad.

You'd be amazed at how many edible plants are out there. Many hundreds, just in North America alone. Edible, yes, but worth gathering? Worth getting into your car, driving somewhere, and searching for them? That's a tall order for a plate of greens. But you rarely need to leave your yard when you want wild greens, and when you do gather greens when you're out and about, it can come as a bonus to go with whatever else you are

hunting, fishing, or foraging.

Case in point: Not long ago, my girlfriend, Holly, and I were wandering along the California coast looking for good places to dig clams and catch Dungeness crabs and maybe a few fish. We were having a rough day, walking a lot and finding little, when a lurid green bushy thing caught the corner of my eye. It was a rambling, succulent plant, about 2 feet tall, draping itself over an ice plant.

"I know this plant!" I told Holly. I thought I'd seen it in my guidebooks, and it just looked edible. Once you learn what larger plant families look like--everything in the mint family has a square stem, for example--you can get a ballpark idea about whether a plant is edible. This plant looked to be in the spinach family. It had large, roughly triangular leaves that were a little fleshy and brittle. I did a test bite: salty (we were in the dunes) but otherwise good. It tasted like spinach.

I did not eat any more of it until I got home and went to my books. This is just common sense. Although there are not too many lethal plants around, it is better to be safe than dashing to the emergency room to get your stomach pumped. When I found the mystery plant in my guidebooks, sure enough, it was New Zealand spinach. (I write more about this particular green in Chapter 4.) That find helped make a tough day worthwhile.

Even if your main interest is looking for meat or fish or fruit, I highly recommend learning your area's wild greens, if only so you can salvage a potentially bad day of foraging with a plate of tasty lamb's-quarters or dandelions or orache.

What follows are some of my favorite wild greens. All are more than edible. They are delicious, pretty, and highly nutritious, and, in some cases, can cost more than \$10 a pound in fancy markets. In most places, I will use the Latin names for the plants I describe, because many have all sorts of local or colloquial names; amaranth and lamb's-quarters are both called pigweed by some. Latin makes sure we're all talking about the same plant.

LAMB'S-QUARTERS, AMARANTH, AND ORACHE

Think of these three as wild spinach, which, in the case of lamb's-quarters, is biologically accurate. Their leaves are smaller than domestic spinach, usually no longer than the palm of your hand. All three are annuals, and all put out lots of little seeds, which some Native Americans ground into flour. You might know one domestic species: It's called quinoa. The leaves of each plant are good simply sauteed with olive oil, salt, and maybe some white wine and grated cheese.

If you are in North America, one of these species grows nearby. I guarantee it. All appear in late spring and last through autumn. You should be able to find these plants with little trouble between May and September.

All three plants start as compact seedlings with soft leaves that can be eaten raw, then grow into rather large sprawly bushes, with tougher leaves that bear a passing

resemblance to spinach. If you are looking them up in a field guide, lamb's-quarters are in the *Chenopodium* genus, amaranth are *Amaranthus*, and orache is *Atriplex patula*.

Lamb's-quarters, amaranth, and orache all love to grow in disturbed places like roadsides. However, I don't recommend that you forage for them there, unless it is a quiet, largely untraveled road. Plants near highways and heavily trafficked areas can pick up heavy metals, and as a forager you run the risk of gathering a plant some road crew sprayed with pesticides yesterday. That could be deadly.

But fear not, this trio loves your garden, too. I get volunteer amaranth plants in my garden all the time, and I know a swath of lamb's-quarters that grows on the grounds of a nearby park. It's in an out-of-the-way spot, so I know it does not get sprayed. The edges of farm fields are an ideal spot to search for them.

Here are some tips on identifying them:

ORACHE. Orache is the easiest to recognize. It tends to like seaside areas or alkaline soil and has leaves about 3 inches long that are dramatically triangular--they look like a medieval weapon called a halberd or one of those wedge-shaped cheese knives. In some places, it's called mountain spinach; in others, saltbush. Its leaves often taste salty, which is pretty cool when you consider how bland most greens taste. It grows to about 3 1/2 feet tall and becomes a slightly woody shrub. Its seed stalks are weedy and sparse, not dense like those of amaranth. Incidentally, you can grow domestic oraches in your garden. I grow a red variety that is striking in a mixed greens saute.

AMARANTH. Amaranth is easily identified by a red tinge in the stalk and in the veins of the leaves. Be careful: Don't mistake it for pokeweed in the East, as eating the older leaves of pokeweed will send you to the hospital (although pokeweed's young shoots are delicious). You can identify pokeweed stems by their rich, dark purple; it's the color of blueberries. Amaranth (or pigweed) stems are a more strawberry red, like rhubarb.

Amaranth leaves are less triangular than either lamb's-quarters or orache. They are a gentle spear shape, with prominent alternate veins at regular intervals. It is most people's mental image of what a generic leaf looks like. The plant will grow to 5 feet, and once it sets seeds you can't miss it. The reddish brown seed clusters are dense and long, and often weigh so much they bend the whole plant over. They look a little like sumac. Amaranth seeds are best in mid-autumn, when the plant is dying and the seedpods are dry.

LAMB'S-QUARTERS. Lamb's-quarters share the same general look as amaranth and orache: tall, weedy, with clusters of little seeds and triangular leaves. But there is a telltale way to spot the plant. Look at the underside of the leaves: They should be silvery and ever-so-slightly fuzzy. Another tip? Water beads on their surface. If you drip water on the underside, it looks like a drop of mercury.

In all cases, pick the leaves and young shoots of the plants. I've cut a lamb's-quarters plant down by half, and it seemed unharmed; within a few weeks, it was growing new sprouts everywhere.

The simplest, best way to eat any wild greens is to wash them well, get a few tablespoons of olive oil hot in a large saute pan, then saute the greens in a covered pan while they are still wet. The resulting steam helps the greens wilt quickly. Add salt as soon as they wilt, maybe some minced garlic, maybe some chile pepper, definitely black pepper, and a squeeze of lemon or lime right when you serve it. It is simplicity itself. It takes less than 5 minutes and keeps most of the nutrients in the greens.

WILD SALAD GREENS: DANDELIONS, WILD CHICORIES, AND LETTUCES

Dandelions and their cousins the chicories and wild lettuces are the "gateway drug" to serious foraging. They probably grow in your lawn, you probably know what they look like, and you're aware they can be eaten. Picked young, dandelion greens are great in salads, and by mid-spring become a stewing green par excellence. When I see dandelion greens for \$1.49 a bunch at the produce section of the supermarket, I smile. How about free, suckers? You will likely have several dozen dandelions growing in your yard at any given time-- more than enough for a few meals.

SOME TIPS ON USING GREENS

Variety is the spice of life. I rarely make a dish of sauteed greens from just one type of plant. Instead, I approach a hot saute the same way I would a mixed green salad: You want something zingy, like mustard or chicory; something substantial, like lamb's-quarters, nettles, or amaranth; and you can spice things up by adding herbs like mint, oregano, basil, parsley, pea or bean shoots, chard, spinach, kale, green onions--you get the point.

Experiment, and find your own favorite combinations. Wild mustard too spicy for you? Look for mallows or dandelions or amaranth instead. Maybe you have lots of chard in your garden, but want something to jazz it up. Add mustard or chicory leaves. Mixing and matching makes for a better saute.

Blanch your greens before sauteing to set the bright color, although this is not strictly necessary. Blanching is, however, a vital step if you plan to freeze your greens. I blanch lamb's-quarters, amaranth, mallow, and orache for 1 to 2 minutes. Most nettles get 3 to 4 minutes (although smaller, more tender varieties need only 1 to 2 minutes), and mustard, dandelions, wild lettuces, and chicories need 2 to 3 minutes. Curly dock needs a full 5 minutes. Once your greens are blanched, you're ready to use them in other recipes.

Dandelions, wild lettuces, and chicories are to winter and early spring what lamb's-quarters, orache, and amaranth are to summer and early fall. In many places, you can get a second crop of dandelions and wild lettuces in late autumn. Look for them just before the snows fly or, in the West, right around Christmas. Nights should still be cool and days not above 70°F. The ideal time to collect yard greens is after a series of cool rains followed by some sunshine. The roots and flowers of both dandelions and chicories are edible, but I will deal with them in another chapter.

One of the best parts about picking these plants is that dandelion greens can often be found growing side by side with young chicory or wild lettuces. A general rule when identifying wild salad greens is that if it looks more or less like a dandelion or escarole leaf, and it is growing in a rosette in your yard, it's probably edible. Pick a leaf and take a bite. It should be a little bitter but not overpoweringly so. Pull the whole plant, if you can--that way, you get your weeding done at the same time you are preserving the leaves. Chicories and dandelions have a thick taproot, while lettuces have root webs much like grass.

Eat young dandelions, chicories, and wild lettuces as a salad, or saute them briefly the way you would lamb's-quarters, amaranth, or orache.

Fun fact: Most typical yard weeds are European migrants that arrived with settlers and are still eaten back in the Old Country.

NETTLES

One of the hallmarks of nettles is that they are among the first of the fresh green things to sprout each spring. In warm climates, nettles can emerge in winter. The first time I ever ate them was in mid-January, when the nettles near my home in Northern California are about 8 inches high-- prime time for picking. Nettles don't emerge until March in most of the country.

Nettles are easy to spot. They grow straight up in large patches, with thin, 4-inch leaves that look a little like lemon balm or mint, only covered with fine stinging hairs. Nettles like wet places and dappled shade. They can emerge as early as late December in Northern California and as late as April in the far north. There are several varieties, some taller, some shorter, some with nastier stings than others. But they are all nettles. And they are all good.

Never grab nettles with your bare hands, or you will be stung. Wear a glove, or use a thick bag as a shield. If the nettles are longer than about 10 inches, use only the top 6 to 8 inches.

To eat nettles, you must first defeat those stinging silica hairs, which will inject you with formic acid--the same acid employed by fire ants. Blanching them will do this and also set and brighten the nettles' striking blue-green color. To blanch nettles, fill your biggest stockpot with water and bring it to a boil, then get the water good and salty. How salty? It should taste like the sea. Grab a bunch of nettles with tongs and dunk them in the boiling water. Let them cook for 1 to 4 minutes, depending on the species of nettle. Regular nettles (*Urtica dioica*) are more substantial than their daintier cousins, the dwarf nettle (*Urtica mens*), and will need longer cooking. Once cooked, transfer the nettles to a bowl of ice water, cool, then drain. Bye-bye, formic acid; hello, delicious wild green.

Other Books

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