

Urban Foraging



With recipes, photos, stories, and more

Urban Foraging

David Craft

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Disclaimer

This book is not a field guide. Field guides describe the habitat and physical characteristics of plants in great detail so that careful readers can identify plants with near certainty. While identifying common wild plants is not overly difficult, the practice should be taken seriously by people who are planning to eat them. When identifying plants for the first time, more than one source should be consulted, and you should be careful not to force a plant to fit a description, which is tempting for a forager keen on finding particular plants. The easiest way to learn plants is to be taught by another person, and therefore it is good to be always on the lookout for anyone who might know about a plant, such as a homeowner tending to his or her garden, or local foragers, botanists, or herbalists giving tours.

Most of the plants that I come across are not poisonous. Growing up, I was told that every berry that was not the

obvious blueberry or raspberry was poisonous. This is far from the case, but the myth persists: people are nervous when they see me eat some red berry unknown to them. This book deals with wild plants that are edible, common, and found in urban areas. Between edible and poisonous lies a set of plants that I group together as “survival food.” Survival food plants are edible but they are not too easy on the palate and so I do not include them in this book (example: the inner bark of the white pine). Thus, this book is neither a survival guide nor a field guide. Instead, it is a stroll through the seasons, along the city streets and in the parks, hunting for tasty, overlooked edible plants. The goals are simple: to inspire people to find and prepare edible plants and, by doing so, to reawaken a sense of gratitude and reverence for the earth and the life it produces, even within the city limits.

Acknowledgments

More than once I have heard that writing a book starts off fun but soon becomes tedious and frustrating. I am happy to report that this never happened during this one (except maybe when I was fighting to get the page numbering to behave). I guess because I have enjoyed foraging so much, writing about it has always been a pleasure too.

The first people I'd like to thank are those that got me into foraging at the start. My mother had her stone-lined herb gardens and taught me that I could eat nasturtium flowers, a little fact I still enjoy pulling out on garden tours. On fishing trips, my dad pointed out that lily pad flowers were edible, something that fascinated me for some reason (but not enough to make me wonder what other plants were also edible). But many years passed between these early memories and when I first did something about it.

On my 33rd birthday, a few friends, unbeknownst to one another, bought me two foraging books: I guess the

time was right to turn this “I should really get into foraging” idea into reality. Lorena and Adam gave me Sam Thayer’s book *Nature’s Garden* and Elizabeth bought me Tom Seymour’s *Foraging New England*. My birthday falls in December, and after poring over these books, I could barely wait to get out into the New England spring.

I thank all the people—Brian DePasquale, Jordan Sachs, Rob House, Corina Bucora, Carsten Botts, Aliza Waxman, Sarah Braga, Sarah Ehrich, the Craft family, Elizabeth Reardon, Adam Gregor, Andrew McCombs, Lorena Levesque, Julie Fins, Stef Lynch, Kayleigh Boyle, and Anna Drinnenberg—who have ever indulged my foraging habit, in particular those friends who came out with me on my early trips when I would slow down hikes, force people to try weird bitter greens, and frighten large gatherings with giant pots of mushroom soup (on one occasion, waivers were signed).

And finally, great thanks to my readers: Rob Riman, Stef Lynch, Eleanor Marks, Sarah Ehrich, Paula Craft, Shannon McDonough, Angie Littwin, Steve Brill, Didi Emmons, Noah Rolff, Annie Newbold, and Ellen Jackson-Mead. These folks combed through early drafts and plucked out many errors, inconsistencies, and run-on sentences, and made the book a whole lot better.

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-Chapter 1-

City Life

As of 2008, for the first time in history, the number of humans living in cities exceeds the number not living in cities. The life of the urban dweller proceeds without much connection to nature, except for the daily news about the weather, or the occasional fallen tree branch obstructing the way. Modern living is in constant struggle with nature: rather than accept the temperature as it is, we burn fuels made from the nature of millions of years ago to keep ourselves in a 72°F environment. And rather than walk down the street—humans are well-designed walking machines—we hop in our cars for a two-mile trip to the grocery store. Of course, this is all perfectly natural, things are the way they are. Life in the city, like life in the woods, involves endless competition, and productivity is the means to ultimate capitalist success. So why waste time

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walking when you can park in more by driving? Still, the lack of *nature* in the city is real. Pavement and buildings are everywhere, sealing off the ground from plants and animals. But fortunately, for those of us who live in cities and still want to take in nature on a daily basis, wild plants find their way in.

Life on earth is a battle. Trees in forests compete for soil nutrients and sunlight, predator and prey counts rise and fall cyclically, and any genetic variation that produces a trait that is favorable, at least for the time being, is preserved. Therefore, even when it seems like all the dirt in a city has been sealed off, a city stroll can still be a nature expedition, and a lesson in tenacity. A goldenrod seed lands in some crack on a bridge and enough city dust blows in to allow the seed to germinate and fill the bridge with flowers. A purslane plant emerges like magic from the line where a building meets the sidewalk. And wherever city planners have placed a park, or citizens have built a garden, so long as the maintenance is a bit lax, weeds—a lot of them edible—enter the scene.

The wild plants in a city are a tiny fraction of what you find in other places, but they are still abundant. In fact, for

people completely new to botany, a city is an ideal place to learn because the variety of plants is much more manageable than what you find on a walk through the countryside. City arborists, when choosing trees to plant on city streets, rely on about six types of trees that are hardy enough to withstand the environment and do not lose their limbs or push up the sidewalk too much. Once you learn to recognize the honey locust, London plane, flowering pears, maples, oaks, and lindens, you have 80% of the trees you'd happen by on an urban nature walk in Boston, New York, Chicago, Seattle, London, and Berlin. And the last three of those six trees provide fine foodstuffs for the urban forager.

This book progresses through the seasons, from early spring to the end of fall. Many plants make more than one edible appearance throughout the year, and this structure allows them to reenter the story when appropriate. Field guides and the Internet are both valuable sources for learning more about the plants and mushrooms discussed in this book. Although photographs are included in these sources, the same plants living under different environments can look very different, and so it is a good idea to get a variety of pictures and viewpoints to learn a

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new plant. The ability of humans to generalize and extract key features of plant life—an obvious benefit evolutionarily—does not get used much by the modern human. As a forager, you get to tap into that neglected ability quite often.

-Chapter 2-

**The Linden:
A Tea Tree and a Salad Tree**

Linden trees, also called basswoods, deserve special attention from urban foragers. Summers always fly by, and springs are too short, but winters seem to hang on forever. And so when the first spring greens appear, humanity celebrates, and maybe the ducks do too. For them, as well as for us, it's time to start foraging again. The linden tree is an early tree to come out of dormancy, and its new buds and leaves are fine eats. The new leaves are so mild and tender that one can use them in a salad. In

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fact, with some dandelion greens thrown in for kick, a few finely chopped wild onions found on a riverbank or a grassy area (look for chive-like greens and yank them up to see if there are small onions attached), and a dressing of olive oil and vinegar and a dash of salt and pepper, you will gracefully enter the world of foraging cuisine: no one will object to a linden salad. Few will even notice they are eating something strange, making this a good plant with which to start your foraging hobby, since many foraged items are quite unusual and a harder sell to people who rarely stray beyond the boundaries of their supermarket.

As with many edible plants, the best time to learn and identify the linden tree does not coincide with the time you want to eat it. For the lindens, the easiest time to identify them is any time in summer. The leaves are heart-shaped but slightly asymmetric, one lobe being less pronounced than the other. The top side of the leaf is shiny and dark, while the underside is paler. In summer, the tree is also covered with narrow, light green leaves, called bracts. A linden bract looks like a narrow tongue, curved like a candy cane.



Characteristic lopsided heart shape of the linden leaf. Linden bracts, the lighter green tongue-shaped leaves, are also shown.

In early spring when the linden leaves first appear, there is a red tinge to the bud. You can eat the whole bud—just grab it and pop it in, since there are no poisonous parts to be careful to avoid. For the next few weeks, as long as the leaves are not too tough, I keep eating them. They never get poisonous, just too tough.

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Wild onions, cleaned and ready to eat. Chopped finely, they make a good addition to a linden salad.

In early to mid summer, linden trees come into blossom with tiny yellow flowers covering the whole tree, making a rich addition to the smells of summer. Take these yellow flowers and the attached bract (the light green tongue), bring them home, and dry them (use a food dryer or leave them out by a sunny window—they dry quickly). Then place the dried plant parts in jars and store them in your cabinet. You can make a tea with them all year long. This is a sought-after tea, full of soothing demulcents. Given that there are plenty of linden trees in a city, it is worth finding a clean one for harvesting. When I started foraging, linden was one of the first trees I looked for since I had read that it

sends out its leaves early. Not knowing just how common they are in cities, I googled for “Boston linden tree” and lucked out, for there was a mention of a single old linden tree outside a church in the South End. Off I went to find the specimen, and sure enough, young buds were emerging. They were green with a touch of red, and they tasted good, if a little plain. When I returned home, I noticed the same buds on the tree right outside my door. Lindens are everywhere in cities.

Due to its widespread distribution, the linden also makes for a good urban foraging demonstration in the city. Eating tree leaves is, in a certain sense, the ultimate in foraging, and to stand under one and pluck the leaves and pop them in, say on a set break outside of your favorite music bar, ought to get some looks. But the first time you find what you think is a linden tree, you might be nervous trying it out. The good news is that many early spring tree leaves are edible (but none are as good as linden). But if you are still nervous and the search on “*your city* linden tree” turns up nothing, then the nearest arboretum is a great way to learn the tree. Find *Tilia americana* or some other *Tilia* species, and take a nibble. The sensation of picking

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the new buds, feeling their softness and their substance at once, and tasting them or the young leaves that they turn into will imprint the tree on your consciousness far better than any pictures or words can. So, for better learning, and to pause to marvel at the architectural intricacies, take these extra minutes here and there to really observe the plants you are eating.

Throughout the summer, city lindens send out new shoots at the stump where they are pruned back, and so occasionally you can find new leaves later in the year, providing a taste of spring in midsummer.

-Chapter 3-

**Hearty Spring Weeds:
Knotweed, Pokeweed, and Milkweed**

*What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not
been discovered.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

There is a profound assurance every year when the same plants come back, healthy and strong, despite the daily reports of how we are ruining the earth and climate. Many of these early risers are edible too, which makes the yearly rebirth all the more exciting. The best plants to look for on the ground in spring, within the

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city limits, are Japanese knotweed, pokeweed, milkweed, evening primrose, and curly dock.

The first three, the knotweed, the pokeweed, and the milkweed, are shoots. A shoot is the name given to a plant that shoots up from the ground, is substantial (thick), and is eaten in that stage. The shoot non-foragers of the world commonly eat is asparagus, also an early spring vegetable. When you eat a shoot, you are eating a plant well before it transforms into what it would otherwise become. In this sense, it is like how we treat grass—constantly mowing it and never letting it mature into a field of hay. When gardeners let their asparagus go, it becomes a tall wispy plant, with little green seed balls that redden in the fall, ending up very different from the shoots that are bundled together in rubber bands, on ice, in supermarkets.

Likewise with knotweed, pokeweed, and milkweed. Knotweed turns into an eight-foot-long, arching, woody-stemmed plant with creamy white flowers. Pokeweed produces robust clusters of vibrant purple berries once used for pen ink. And milkweed yields fragrant pink flowers that, after pollination, give rise to milkweed pods, full of cottony seeds that fly away in a winter breeze. Milkweed

Pods provide the only home for monarch butterfly eggs. The fibers from the pods were also gathered and used as fill for life jackets in World War II. Thomas Edison tried to cultivate milkweed as a source for rubber, but the amount of latex in the plants was too small for him to be successful.



Japanese knotweed shoots. Note the bamboo-like sectioning. The knotweed is hollow everywhere except at these segments.

Knotweed is the most common of these plants. Native to mountainous regions of China and Japan, it was introduced into the United States sometime in the mid-

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1800s and popularized as an ornamental—the story goes, without hard evidence—by Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Boston’s Emerald Necklace and New York’s Central Park, among many other North American parks. By 1910, however, a popular garden book was already warning readers to “think twice, possibly thrice, before planting [it] within the garden enclosure.” Although a pretty plant, once it escaped the confines it was planned for, Japanese knotweed turned out to be extremely adept at growing anywhere (rivers, cracks in the sidewalk, highway median strips, and up through dense hedges), becoming universally despised. In Great Britain, it is a federal offense to plant Japanese knotweed. The only people I know who like knotweed are foragers, everyone else hates it. When you harvest knotweed, you are doing a true community service—except that you could never control a knotweed patch simply by harvesting it, it is far more resilient than that.

Appropriately, the first time I found knotweed was because of an eradication program underway. A posted sign indicating eradication efforts alerted my friends and me to the possible presence of knotweed, so we got off of our bikes and poked around. Soon we spotted some, and then

we realized it was all over the place. The idea of eradicating knotweed is funny—like trying to eradicate rats in New York City.



Japanese knotweed will grow anywhere. Here are some patches breaking through pavement of an abandoned lot.

The time to harvest knotweed is during its first weeks of growth: after it breaks through the ground and when the stalks are no taller than about a foot and a half. After this, the hollow and juicy shoots become too tough and fibrous. If the knotweed area has not been cleared, the tall remains of last year's crop make for fun roughhousing as you break through them to get to the new growth. To harvest, snap off

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the shoots near the ground—a quick snap will produce a satisfying popping sound.

Black Sesame Japanese Knotweed Salad

5 raw knotweed shoots, sliced diagonally, ¼-inch pieces
The pulp of 1 grapefruit, broken up
1 can black beans, drained
5 scallions or wild onions, sliced thinly
5 tablespoons black sesame seeds, lightly roasted

Dressing:

2 tablespoons soy sauce
1 tablespoon chile paste
1 tablespoon maple syrup
½ cup grapefruit juice

Toss salad with dressing and serve.

In the kitchen, knotweed can be a tricky sell, as many people cringe at the taste of it, raw or cooked. But I think one of the reasons for this is that because there is so much of it, hungry foragers like me gather it in bulk and try to

sneak it into every meal. Exercising some modest discretion, one might not turn people away from this vegetable.

Spicy Japanese Knotweed Pickles

10 cups chopped young Japanese knotweed shoots

5 cups water

5 cups white vinegar

A few tablespoons of various pickling spices. I like to use whole black peppercorns, hot pepper flakes, and coriander for knotweed.

Salt to taste

Combine the water, vinegar, salt and spices and bring to a boil. Remove from the heat and add the chopped knotweed. Jar the pickles right away in sterilized canning jars, or just let them cool in the pot. Ready for consumption as soon as they are cooled down.

It is crunchy, tart, and pretty, with flecks of red on a green stalk. Some people like it raw, but the best way to use it seems to be to treat it as if it were rhubarb and go from

there. Thus, strawberry rhubarb pie becomes strawberry knotweed pie. For those of us looking to avoid so much sugar, it works fine in stir-fries and soups as well, although if it is cooked for longer than a few minutes, the color becomes an unattractive brown-green, so better to drop it finely chopped into a soup just before serving. For a classy presentation, try the black sesame knotweed salad.

Knotweed freezes well too. Just pack it up raw in plastic bags, and it will store for the year until the next batch comes out. Another option is making a spicy pickled knotweed, which has become my favorite knotweed preparation. Lastly, a google search on *itadori recipe* will turn up some traditional Japanese preparations.

Compared to knotweed, pokeweed is a much more intimidating plant for beginning foragers. With knotweed, if you find a plant in early spring that is hollow and crunchy and lemony, that grows in colonies, and that is segmented along the length like mature bamboo, you probably have the right plant. Pokeweed, on the other hand, is toxic raw and is only edible when young and boiled for 10 minutes. It is also harder to identify for beginning foragers. Like knotweed, pokeweed is best identified by looking for last

year's dead stalks. Mature pokeweed is very easy to identify because the shape (like a bunch of little grapes) and color (dark red-purple) of the berry clusters are so distinct. When you find it at that stage at the end of summer, remember the spot and then revisit in mid-spring. The shoots will be coming up in the same spot. The shoots are about a centimeter thick, not hollow, and a juicy light green when sliced. There are also some red tones on the stem and leaves. If the area has not been cleared, the dead stalks (with spongy interiors) from last year will probably be present, including the faint remains of the berry clusters, looking a little ghostly. This will help you identify pokeweed in places you haven't seen it before. It pokes up in poorly managed plant areas, under evergreen trees and shrubs, along railroad tracks, under overpasses, and along fences and roadsides.

To prepare pokeweed, harvest the shoots when they are young (under eight inches) and boil them for ten minutes in a good amount of water. Do not harvest the large taproots—these are toxic. Drain and rinse. Enjoy them with salt and olive oil for a spartan presentation. Or try them in a salad of

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quinoa, pokeweed, and roasted red pepper for something more fancy.



Pokeweed is easier to find when its berries are out, but this is not when you want to harvest the plant. The berries are poisonous to humans.

Native to North America, pokeweed has been used here for a long time. Native Americans ate it and used it medicinally. Elvis Presley sang about it in the hit tune *Poke Salad Annie*. In Arkansas it was canned and sold commercially by Allen Canning Company up until the spring of 2000. They did not stop because demand was down—they stopped because it is hard to cultivate this plant, since the seeds need to pass through a bird's digestive system to germinate. Therefore, they had to harvest their

pokeweed wild, and there were not enough people for this task, so they stopped producing it.



Pokeweed shoots in the spring emerging from an abandoned city lot. At this stage, the entire above-ground portion of the plants can be picked and boiled for food.

Most plants we know from grocery stores have a single part that people eat. Exceptions are beets, turnips and carrots. In those cases, *some* people eat the green tops in addition to the roots. In the foraging world, many plants

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offer multiple edible parts, with these parts emerging at different times of the year. The linden tree is like this, but one of the best plants for multiple edible parts is the milkweed.

In the early spring, along river banks, on the grassy areas sloping down from overpasses, and sometimes along city streets and in the mini front yards of city residences, milkweed shoots poke up. They are smooth and green and about a half-inch thick, similar to pokeweed shoots but smoother and stiffer, and without the large unopened leaves characteristic of pokeweed shoots. Dogbane shoots are a toxic look-alike to milkweed shoots. To differentiate, I start by verifying that some of last year's dried gray pods are lying around the area. Then, a close examination of the milkweed shoots and bottoms of the leaves should reveal soft white fuzz, whereas dogbane shoots are smooth and hairless. Also, when a milkweed shoot is sliced crosswise, it exudes a lot of milky latex, and the stalk is hollow; in contrast, dogbane shoots only leak a little latex, and they are solid.

Yanking straight upward on the milkweed shoots releases them (whereas pokeweed should be cut or torn

since the roots of it are toxic). The lower parts of milkweed shoots are whiter, with earthy coloring, but you can eat these parts too. And, true to the name, one often gets sticky with white, milky latex when gathering milkweed, a reassuring feature for beginning foragers.



A meal of milkweed shoots. When broken, they exude quite a bit of white latex, which is a helpful guide to identifying the plant. Also, look around for dried pods from the previous year.

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The jury is still out on whether or not milkweed shoots are bitter. Euell Gibbons, when writing in the 1960's, contended that milkweed is bitter and recommended boiling it in multiple changes of water. Sam Thayer more recently has refuted this and claims milkweed shoots are not bitter at all, and can even be sampled raw. I come right in between. Many of the milkweed shoots I have eaten are perfectly fine with no bitter principle, tasting a bit like green beans. But in nearly every batch I get a few bitter ones, and trying to figure out which ones will be bitter by appearance has proven futile.

Milkweed shoots can be gathered until they are about 10 inches tall, after which they become tough and stringy. They should be boiled for about 10 minutes and then strained, and they then can be served with olive oil, salt, and pepper, or tossed into a stir-fry. Milkweed plants produce plenty of other fine foods throughout the season, so take only a small fraction of the milkweed shoots you find—not only for yourself, but also for the butterflies, for other animal foragers, and for next year's crop.

-Chapter 4-

Spring Roots

When we are in the deep of winter, when the bears in the Berkshires are hibernating and frogs are frozen beneath the leaves of the forest floor (truly), the seeds and the roots that will become the greenery of next year are lying there in waiting too.

One of the first plants to make an appearance is the evening primrose. All winter, the root has been sitting in the ground until the temperature cue says: “ready to start your second year.” This root is highly sought after by foragers. An early bulky food, it helps quell the chorus of foraging skeptics constantly questioning how one can get anything of substance from foraging.

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Here are a couple of hints for finding evening primrose. It grows among other wild flowers and occasionally pops up in gardens, sometimes intentionally and other times not. It also likes sandy soils near shores of rivers and oceans. The evening primrose is a robust plant, tall and with sturdy stems that branch like a cactus. This plant is easiest to identify in midsummer, when the fragile yellow flowers come out. In the spring though, the time when the roots are good to eat, the key to finding them is to look for the dead stalks from the previous year. They are often still standing, around five or six feet tall, and the browned stems are covered with narrow, centimeter-long, curled, open seed pods. This is a good place to search the ground for the new leaves of the second-year plants. Also, since they are one of the first plants to emerge, you have a better chance of spotting them.

Lying flat on the ground, a round rosette of flat elongated green leaves emerges. These leaves have a slight red tinge to them, and the mid-vein, the main line right down the middle of the leaf, is characteristically white (other plant leaves show a lighter mid-vein too, but not as prominently as evening primrose). If you find a suspected

evening primrose, get out your trowel and carefully dig it up. If it has a decent-size white root, with a slight red tinge near the leaves, you have probably found the plant. Sometimes the root will be skimpy and not worth collecting, but a few weeks of experience squeezing at the base of the leaves to size it up will make you good at predicting which ones will be worthwhile.



Evening primrose shown three ways: uprooted, still in the ground, and a stalk from the previous year.

I am always compelled to speak about the greatness of each plant I forage. This has a lot to do with the thrill of finding a bargain (free food!) and has little to do with the actual taste of the particular plant. To put it all on the table

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regarding evening primrose, there is a minor issue with it as a food. Even after the requisite boil of 5-10 minutes, some people complain of an itchiness or scratchiness left in the back of the throat after eating this plant. Raw cattail shoots do the same thing to me. And lots of other foraged foods have their quirks too. This causes a dilemma, because foragers who have not yet turned entirely hermitic will want to share their goods with others. Most people are wary of trying new foods, and these quirks do not help.



A substantial wild carrot, dug in early spring before it gets too woody to eat. If left undisturbed, the wild carrot becomes the famous wild flower Queen Anne's lace.

Arguments I run over and over again in my head to entice people to eat some of the weirder foods found out there go like this: 1) Urban foraging is a modern person's grasp at reconnecting with the world of dirt and plants, so we should love these quirks in celebration of this reunion; 2) A strange and completely new taste is a rare opportunity, and if we get comfortably set in our ways, we are getting old and boring.

I have convinced myself to love all of these challenging characteristics that have been bred out of domesticated vegetables. If I feel a scratchiness, I am feeling something, some real plant that I cannot buy but that I can eat, and this is one of its trademarks. I've also tried the following approach on people: Imagine you are on a desert island and all there is to eat is boiled evening primrose roots—then such trivialities would not matter...dig in! Unfortunately, this argument doesn't work any better than the others. So what I often end up doing is disguising quirky plants in large soups, and if I start feeling a scratch in my throat, I expedite the after-dinner drinks. One such disguise I recently hit upon for evening primrose root is to serve it with cocktail sauce (ketchup plus horseradish). For years

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I've been wondering what would make a good shrimp substitute for the classic party hors d'oeuvre. The evening primrose root fits the bill: white and pink and crunchy, and mild enough to let the cocktail sauce (the real force behind shrimp cocktail) shine through.



Early leaf growth of a burdock plant, ready for digging.

Burdock and wild carrot are two other roots to look for in the springtime. Wild carrot is the same plant as Queen Anne's lace, a recognizable wild flower. When the Queen Anne's lace is blooming, for show-and-tell I sometimes yank one up and have people smell the broken root: carrot, exactly! At that point though, the root is too woody to eat,

but it is a good way to learn the plant and mark a good spot to look in early spring for little green carrot tops emerging. Wild carrots are white and not as big as their domesticated counterparts, but sometimes you can get lucky and find some slightly hefty ones. If the smell is not strongly reminiscent of carrot and the tops don't look exactly like a smaller version of the tops of store-bought carrots, there is the danger that the plant might be poison hemlock. So if you are uncertain, it's better to avoid this plant.



Burdock roots, the spade that dug them, a burdock leaf, and some burdock burrs.

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Burdock root is also available as soon as the ground thaws and the greens emerge to tell you where the plant is. Burdock is easier to find in the fall—for a more thorough description see Chapter 12—but it is good to briefly mention it here too. The leaves of the emerging basal rosette of the burdock plant are green, soft and fuzzy. They can be eaten after being boiled, but they are terrible. The root underneath, however, is a meal in itself: the larger your shovel, the more root you will get. If you don't find any during your first spring of foraging, there are plenty of other plants out there you will find. Then when fall comes, and burdocks have giant leaves, you'll spot them easily.

-Chapter 5-

Urban Popeye: Spring and Summer Greens and Such

A foraging book, urban or otherwise, would be incomplete without discussing the world's most famous wild edible weed: the dandelion. The dandelion grows over almost the entire world. The plant distribution maps available at plants.usda.gov show a completely filled-in map for *Taraxacum officinale*, going all the way into northernmost Alaska and covering all of Texas as well. Every part of the dandelion is a food source, except once I tried to make an edible straw out of the

hollow stem and that was a complete failure. The most popular part of the plant in the States these days is the leaves, best in early spring (and briefly in the fall). The identification of the plant—when it is missing its bright yellow flower—is found in our name for it, which derives from the French *dent de lion*, tooth of the lion. The leaves have large notches that do look a bit like ferocious teeth.

Dandelion Flower Bread

1 cup unbleached flour
1 cup whole-wheat flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon salt
1-2 cups dandelion flower petals
¼ cup vegetable oil
¼ cup maple syrup
½ cup apple sauce
1 ⅓ cups almond milk

Mix all ingredients until just blended and pour into a greased loaf pan. Bake at 400°F for about 25 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean.

Dandelion is eaten across the world. The roots can be boiled and eaten or roasted and ground for a coffee substitute, which is also commercially available. Recipes abound on the web for such things as dandelion jelly, dandelion wine, and dandelion soup, and there is at least one national dandelion cook-off. The crown of the plant, the emerging flower buds before they have shot up at all, can be dug out with a small knife and briefly boiled for an interesting bulky food.

The dandelion is a fast-growing plant. Shortly after its leaves appear, it sends out its bright yellow flower—pretty yet despised by most, which is a common sentiment toward aggressively successful plants. The flowers are edible, as are the buds, which can go right into a stir-fry. Dandelions also provide a great activity to encourage children to become forager-bakers: dandelion flower bread. A loaf of dandelion flower bread is not worth making for its taste, which is subtle (subtle of course being a culinary euphemism for bland). It is worth making because it is fun to do and is a good activity for the little ones. It also looks nice and provides a great vehicle for a tasty jam.

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To make dandelion flower bread, bring the kids into a field and set them on a task: bring back 50 flowers. If they are at the stage of learning to count, here's a good time to throw that in there too. Once you gather about five cups of flowers, you should be good for one loaf. The next stage involves sitting around a table, and, instead of peeling apples like you might in the fall, you pluck the yellow flower petals out. Pile just the yellow flower petals into a bowl until you have about two cups of them. Your fingers will be yellow and sticky afterward. I did this with my nephew once, and he enjoyed himself (especially the picking part—the separating part he was not so good at, but he was only four). I was thinking I was well on my way to making a little forager out of him until later in the day, when he told me: “I'm hungry...but I don't want to eat plants.”

Another common but less recognized plant with healthy edible leaves is curly dock. Curly dock is a potherb, which refers to any plant that one prepares by cooking it down, either by boiling or sautéing. *Dock* is an old English term for potherb. *Curly* refers to the wavy shape of the leaf edges. Curly dock has a lemony zing to it, like Japanese

knotweed, and therefore it makes a pleasant addition to stir-fries and soups. A downside is that, like Japanese knotweed, it goes from a pleasant deep green to a pale brown-green on cooking, so it is best used as a part of a dish and well mixed in. Unless, of course, like Thoreau with his scrawny and gnarly wild apples, you find beauty in everything nature provides. Curly dock is a perennial, found year after year



An abundant edible, curly dock is recognized by its long narrow leaves with wavy edges. Young leaves can be eaten raw, but I prefer to cook my curly dock leaves in a stir-fry or a soup.

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in the same spot, and it will keep on producing as you continue to harvest leaves from it. There are other edible docks around but curly dock is the best-tasting of the common ones. During winter the plants can be identified by their brown stems, a few feet high and densely covered with seeds. This plant has a long harvesting period, which makes it one of my favorites.

Lots of other edible greens come out in the spring. The best of these, and one of my favorite foraging plants in general, is lamb's quarters. Not only is it everywhere, but it makes the best spinach substitute of all the potherbs. It is available over the entire summer and is packed with nutrients. I recently sprinkled a bunch of lamb's quarters seeds in my garden to create my own patch of it.

Another name for lamb's quarters is goosefoot, which is helpful for identifying the plant: the leaves often bear resemblance to a webbed foot. The other identifying feature is the white powder on the part of the leaves closest to the stem. A lamb's quarters plant in good soil can grow to be quite tall, but in the city I rarely find them over a few feet high.



A lamb's quarters plant growing out of a crack next to a dumpster. The leaves have the shape of a webbed foot and the newest ones closest to the stem are dusted with a white powder.

Lamb's quarters can stand as the main player in a recipe: cooked lamb's quarters with salt and wild onions will go down without question from most diners. The color stays a deep green, and the plant exceeds spinach in its vitamin and protein content,[§] while matching it in soft

§ The protein craze, including the idea that complementary proteins need to be consumed at the same time, is largely

texture. Cooked greens are the main way I enjoy lamb's quarters, but when the leaves first come out I also eat them raw. In late summer, it is possible to harvest the small black grains—like amaranth seeds—that the plants produce but in the city the plants don't usually grow in conditions that make this possible.

Lady's thumb is a runner-up to lamb's quarters. It is common, has a long season, and like curly dock and lamb's quarters, should be steamed or boiled before eating if the leaves are a bit tough. Lady's thumb is easy to identify because of the distinct dark splotch in the middle of each leaf. Depending on the growing conditions, this dark spot can be faint or very obvious. Sometimes after rain and at night, this spot really pops out as the leaves glisten. Plus, since they've just been washed by the rain, this is a great time to pick some, although it is probably smart to rinse them again at home. Once, when I skipped this step, one of my dinner guests found a wooden match in her greens. Luckily she was not squeamish (she was Romanian), and

discredited by nutritionists today. The Centers for Disease Control website, www.cdc.gov, is a good place to read about this. Plants contain plenty of protein for the human diet.

she, like myself, appreciated this evidence that we were eating from the land around us.

When picking lady's thumb, just pluck individual leaves since the stems are a bit tough. For lamb's quarters, on the other hand, you can grab a bunch of the leaves (from the top of the plant, leaving the rest of the plant to grow)



Lady's thumb after some rain, when the dark splotches in the middle of each leaf are most obvious.

without too much discretion, since those stems are not too tough and taste fine. By the end of the summer you can find lady's thumb leaves that are up to six inches long, but I

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usually gather them only when they are no bigger than two inches since they are more tender then. Later in summer, lady's thumb produces a vertical stack of tightly bundled pink flowers, but the thumbprint on each leaf is distinct enough that you don't need to wait for these flowers to identify the plant. Some other members of the smartweed family resemble lady's thumb but do not have the fringe of hairs around the leaf-stem joints that lady's thumb has. These other plants are not poisonous—they just don't taste very good.

Both lady's thumb and lamb's quarters are commonly found as garden weeds, so urbanites who want to help weed urban gardens should keep this in mind.

-Chapter 6-

**The Variety of Life:
Early Flowers and Early Berries**

To open your eyes to the natural world is to be continually astounded by the variety of life. I have considered becoming a biologist or a botanist, but it's possible that spending eight-plus hours per day observing the natural world would send me overboard, frozen with awe. A few walks per week foraging is a good balance for me. Obsessed with order, humans have spent lots of time classifying plants and animals and fungi, and to date we have described about 2 million species. The task of estimating how many total species exist is formidable, and current estimates range from 5 million to 30 million.

Taxonomic trees for the known species are continually being rearranged to account for new DNA findings of ancestral relationships among life forms. Mushrooms are especially prone to such reclassification. Initially, mushrooms were grouped together into genera based on the form—basically, the mechanism by which they disperse their spores. Mushrooms can have gills, which create a lot of surface area to generate and expel spores from (for example, the familiar button mushroom and the portobellos found in grocery stores), or they can have tightly packed tubes for spore dispersal (for example, hen-of-the-woods and porcinis). But there are also mushrooms that rely on raindrops and animals to come and crush them, releasing a puff of spores that looks like brown smoke (puffballs). And then there are truffles, which never send a mushroom body above the surface but live entirely under the dirt and, by producing enticing smells and tastes, get forest critters like squirrels to dig them up and take them from place to place.

It was originally thought that each fungus form defined a different branch of the taxonomic tree, but recent findings show that all branches give rise to these different forms. Thus a mushroom book from 50 years ago will contain

many mushrooms whose scientific names are now different. Botanists swear by their Latin names, but this influx of DNA classification is reason enough for me to stick by the common names when possible. The porcini will always be the porcini.

A general rule that I've accepted is that if you can conceive of it, it exists in nature. We have plants that eat animals (Venus fly traps and the pitcher plant), single-sex lizards that reproduce by parthenogenesis, and thousands of species of water bears—microscopic animals with eight legs, existing over the range of extreme environmental conditions from hot springs to the tops of the Himalayas. Our biggest mammals, the whales, eat tiny plankton we can't even see. There is a mushroom that reproduces by infecting ants, sending them into a delirium that causes them to climb upward, clamp onto a high branch, die, and sprout new mushrooms out of their heads. Every apple seed gives rise to an apple tree different than the tree it came from. Over the course of time, an estimated 4,000 distinct types of apples have been cultivated. How many more delightful apples-to-be do we toss out with our apple cores every day?

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The heart-shaped leaves and the purple flowers of the violet make this plant hard to miss. Violets grow in bunches and are found in lawns and in the woods. Young leaves, before they get too tough, are a good salad green, and the flowers add a little edible color.

All of this variety directly impacts the urban forager too. The natural life cycle of a plant consists of gathering energy from the summer sun to grow and produce seeds, and possibly to store energy in roots for perennials and biennials. But before the seed can be made, the plant needs to flower for sexual reproduction, stirring up the gene pool. And even though we are not the pollinators, the flowers often smell and taste sweet to us, not just to the bees.

If there is an opportunity out there, Darwin assures us that something will fill the void. Bees are busy for all of the warm months because different plants are sending out their flowers at different times. Violets come out early on, and their heart-shaped leaves are good for a salad at this early stage, along with their purple or occasionally white flowers. People with lots of patience and a sweet tooth can enjoy hand painting violet flowers with a sugary egg white solution to make candied violets.

But the king of the early flowers for foragers, a dessert unto itself, needs no help from the sugar plantations of the Caribbean. This is the black locust flower. The black locust is native to the southern United States but has become naturalized across the entire eastern U.S. and parts of the west too. When grouped together, the twisting trunks and deeply furrowed bark of the plant can produce a haunted, fairytale-looking plot, as a bunch of them do in an old graveyard set off the road in Lanesville, a small section of Gloucester, MA. In tall trees, the white bunches of drooping flowers are sometimes completely out of reach, but in younger trees or trees with limbs that bend down far enough, the white flowers are there for you to grab.

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Black locust flowers, plucked and ready for eating.

Start by smelling them. A thick, jasmine-like scent fills you up, with a taste that is just as good. I pluck a whole bunch and then strip off the flowers with my teeth. Other edible flowers are at best color additions to salads, but these black locust flowers are hearty, crunchy, and sweet, and make a great snack in the field or at the table back home. If you want an impressive and unique dessert using fresh specimens, try black locust fritters. Using whole-wheat flour ought to partially offset the fact that these are best when fried in lots of oil.

Black Locust Fritters

½ cup silken tofu
½ cup whole-wheat flour
1 cup almond milk or water
¼ teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon maple syrup
1 teaspoon baking powder
About 20 black locust flower bunches
Canola or coconut oil for frying

Mix the dry ingredients together. Then add the tofu, almond milk, and maple syrup. Blend or whip until smooth. Keeping the flowers on the stem, dip the entire flower bunch into the batter and fry a few at a time in oil over medium heat, flipping after a few minutes. Drain on paper towels. Serve hot or warm.

Black locust trees are actively cultivated in cities and yards, but most people do not know the flowers are edible, so there are plenty to eat when you find the trees. I'll sometimes stand under a giant and ponder about all the tasty flowers draping the entire canopy above. I wonder, how could I get them all, and then what would I do with

them? They freeze okay for use later on in oatmeal, but they are far better fresh and are a challenge to preserve.

Were they around all year I could easily start each day with a bunch or two, but like many foraged foods, these flowers are only out for a few weeks. Foraging encourages a Buddhist sense of non-attachment in us: what is here and good today is gone tomorrow.

Another early flower, this one on a shrub, is juneberry. These flowers are not for eating—they merely help you locate the small trees and remind you that their berries will be out soon. The flowers are white and star-shaped (ray flowers) and come out a month or so before black locust flowers. The bush has smooth, gray bark and stands anywhere from 10 to 20 feet tall, usually with three to six individual plants clumped together and emanating from the same spot, like a lilac bush.

The name of the juneberry is a helpful mnemonic for the forager, since it is a reminder that by June you can be hunting for berries. The plant also goes by the name of shad bush, since the flowering of it coincides with the running of the shad, a migrating ocean river fish. It is also called serviceberry, saskatoon, sarvisberry, and shadblow, the

flood of regionally distinct common names probably related to the fact that, without economic importance, there is no push toward a single shared name.

The berries, out in June, resemble blueberries but are a bit less sweet, and the seeds inside them are slightly larger, making the entire berry a little mealier. Still, the entire berry is edible, seeds and all, and if you add them to pancakes, no one will know they are not blueberries. Like blueberries, they freeze well. So if you are lucky enough to find some shrubs with lots of fruit, save some for later months. Freezing them on a cookie sheet before bagging them prevents the berries from sticking together in one clump in the freezer.

Unfortunately, urban planners usually avoid planting fruit trees in the city because of the “unwanted” fruit they drop. Urban fruit trees, if found, occupy out-of-sight corners and are never as common as the oaks, lindens, maples, Callery pears (inedible), and sycamores that line the streets. Sometimes though, a corporate landscape or a small municipal park will contain a few juneberries, probably chosen for their early flowers. I have found them planted along rivers and ponds in cities (Central Park has

some), in landscaping around malls, and on college campuses. Once, while I was picking a haul of them by an office building in downtown Boston, a quirky older gentleman came up and asked me, “What are you going to do with those *Amelanchier canadensis*?” Sometimes, if you know the Latin name, you just have to say it.

While farmers’-market shoppers go berry-free after strawberries and before the arrival of the August onslaught—blueberries and raspberries and blackberries—urban foragers enjoy a steady stream of berries from the time the juneberry comes out. A fantastic urban berry appearing just as the juneberries are fading is the mulberry.

Mulberries are among the easier trees to identify. The berries look like multi-colored blackberries, and the leaves come in all sorts of shapes—mittens with anywhere from zero to six thumbs. The berries on a single tree ripen at different times, offering a harvest window of a few weeks. In the middle of this period, look up at a productive tree and you’ll see mulberries of all colors. They range from white to pink to red to almost black, unless you have found a white mulberry tree, in which case ripe berries are a pale white with a tinge of brown and red, and they do not taste

nearly as good as the other mulberries (*insipid* is the taste described by some books). Nonetheless, even the white mulberries are sweet. Since they are some of the earlier sweets to emerge, these too make it into my foraging bags. The young leaves of any mulberry tree make a very nice cooked green, and juiced raw they yield a vitamin-packed, wheatgrass-like shot.

The easiest way to find a mulberry tree is to keep your eyes on the ground as you walk the neighborhoods. Ripe mulberries fall easily and get squashed to dark purple stains on the sidewalk. Around mulberry time, this is the only plant dropping such fruits, so if you look up and see blackberry-looking fruits and varied leaf shapes, you have a mulberry. Start munching, and bagging if you have the time.

If a tree is loaded with fruit and not hanging over a busy street, an efficient way to get the berries is by laying down a sheet and shaking the branch over it. I refrain from using this method on my favorite mulberry tree in Boston, however, because the ducks like the mulberries too. They wait and wait for them to drop to the ground below, so I

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feel like using the sheet method would be unfair. Instead, for that particular tree, I harvest the berries individually



Mulberry tree with some dark ripe berries. The others will be ready in a week or so.

and toss a few to the ducks while I do so. In the city, it is particularly important to be considerate to what little wild animal life there is. If there is an item that the birds and squirrels like and there is not much of it, I make it a point to share with these guys, the real foragers.

Mulberries are good enough to eat on their own, and they freeze well for smoothies too. While shaking onto a

sheet works well for harvesting a lot of berries fast, a good mulberry tree leaves me with the same longing as a good black locust tree when I gaze up at all that food high overhead: so much food, and such short arms. For this reason, I do not worry too much about “stealing food from the animals,” because they can scurry and fly right up there. Plus, no matter how well I know my city, I still have only explored a small fraction of the streets, so I know I always leave plenty for them.

Edible Flowers

The flowers of many cultivated plants and many weeds are edible and always add a fine splash of color to a salad—and sometimes a nice flavor too. Two of the flowers that I add to salads for their color, even though they have almost no taste, are chicory (pale blue, shaped like a tiny sunflower) and vetch (purple, shaped like a tiny bunch of grapes). These both grow in abandoned spots and fields. Chicory roots, incidentally, make a great coffee substitute, so if I see a particularly large plant I uproot it, clean and roast the root, and grind it for coffee as needed.

Slightly more tasty flowers include violets, tulips, and pansies. If you are going for the violets and the leaves are still young, grab some of them for the salad as well. Roses not only smell great but also taste pretty good, and the fruit of the roses, called rose hips, are edible as well. Evening primrose flowers (yellow, late summer) are slightly spicy, but less so than nasturtium flowers, which are grown in lots of gardens. Nasturtium leaves are edible and quite good too. Big bunches of black locust flowers, most too high in the tree to get but hopefully some within reach, can almost

make a meal in themselves—succulent, sweet, and crunchy. Lilac flowers also come in bunches and are edible, and they make an unexpected topping for cupcakes. Likewise with wisteria. Milkweed flowers are edible after parboiling for a few minutes, but I don't use them. Leaving the milkweed flowers undisturbed, the plant will produce more milkweed pods, which is a superior food and one that monarch butterflies rely on. Daylilies are also edible but should be tried in small amounts at first because they can give some people an upset stomach. Eating just the petals and not the stamen or pistils might help here.

-Chapter 7-

Road Trip to the Country

Even an urban forager wants to be able to spot the common good edible plants found outside of the city limits. This is not to say you need to be an expert at harvesting and processing wild rice or finding groundnuts (a food that helped sustain the Pilgrims on their first winter, though not by their own foraging efforts—Miles Standish found an Indian cache of them and raided it). However, you should be able to spot some of the classic foraged items: watercress, fiddlehead ferns, ramps (wild leeks), and morels. Mention foraging for edible mushrooms

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three times, and twice someone will ask if you have found morels. Morels are a highly prized, wild edible mushroom. It is so prized, in fact, that people keep their morel spots locked in secrecy. Morels are much more common in the Midwest and the West, but they are found sporadically in the eastern United States too. In terms of quickly adding to your country foraging knowledge, the morel is a good choice because its shape is so distinct: if you stare at a picture of one for a minute or so, you will be able to identify them in the wild. But there is considerable mystery on the issue of where to find them. Some possibilities are abandoned apple orchards or recently burnt land. Once, at a bar, I overheard that some had been found by the train tracks in an industrial part of town.

Morels need to be cooked before eating, and in fact, it is a very good rule of thumb to cook all wild mushrooms (with the exception of the beefsteak mushroom, *Fistulina hepatica*, which is best raw, thinly sliced, and tossed with garlic, olive oil, and salt). If you are having trouble finding them, which is a likely scenario in the Northeast, you can find them at high-end grocery stores. Study them here. Then, when out for a walk on some warm spring day, you

might just spot one, which is always a rush since they hide and then jump out like gold in a 49er's pan. The same feeling occurs when you spot a bunch of fiddlehead ferns: little treasures popping up in damp areas, associations of leprechauns and the magical forest world.

Fiddlehead ferns, one of the most famous wild foods, can be found in most high-end grocery stores in the spring. If you ever see them for sale, take the time to get a lesson in the characteristics of the plant. Lots of ferns start off in a fiddlehead stage. This is just a tightly balled up fern. However, the one that you are seeking when you are off in the country is the ostrich fern. This is the best tasting of all the ferns that start off as fiddleheads, and there are two key features to help identify the plant. The most defining is the grooved stalk. Just like a piece of celery, the ostrich fern has a deep groove along the entire length of its stalk. The second feature is the smoothness of the plant itself. Most other ferns have a slight fuzziness or all-out furriness at the fiddlehead stage, but the ostrich fern is smooth and green with papery brown flaky scales that rub off easily (although you do not need to rub them off to eat the fern). Ostrich ferns come up in sets of four to eight or so, and you should

only harvest a couple of them per set, leaving the majority. Harvest them at the base of the stalk. That is, take the whole above-ground part of the plant, even though grocery stores only sell the part that is balled up. The long straight stems taste just as good. Also, harvest only while the plant is still tightly rolled up. When it begins to unfurl, toxins appear in the plant. The preferred way to eat fiddleheads is to let their crunchiness and greenness shine by quickly pan-searing them with olive oil, garlic, and salt.

This trick of letting the foraged items come to you, already identified, can be used very productively at farmers' markets, where fiddleheads, ramps, and even wild mushrooms are common. Since mushrooms are some of the best-tasting and exciting foods to forage, and also more scary than wild plants, having an identified sample to learn from is a huge time saver. Always poke around your local farmers' markets to see if there are foraged mushrooms or other items there, and take the time to study them closely.

It shouldn't be surprising, but when plants show up precisely in the habitat the plant books say they will, it always gives me a little jolt of amazement. It means that seeds of essentially all plants have dropped everywhere,

and they take when the conditions are right. That this happens so reliably across the board is a reminder of just how long the plants have had to find their way into these habitats: thousands and thousands of years. One thousand years is a blip in the history of the natural world. You might not recognize the languages, the customs, or the smells if you were dropped into the world 3,000 years ago, but the plants would be the same. They've had plenty of time to find their favorite places.

Watercress likes shallow, slow-moving, trickling streams. It is a crunchy, spicy, green plant that grows in the water with roots dangling just beneath the surface—true hydroponic growth. Often the colony extends across the entire brook. Gather it by tearing or knifing it, being careful not to uproot it. If you find yourself on Martha's Vineyard, look on a map for the big lagoon. At the southern tip of it, the head of the lagoon, is such an enormous patch of watercress that I feel okay about putting this specific location in the book—I think this location will never run out of watercress. If the source of your watercress is a pristine place, you can enjoy it raw, but I usually opt for the safety of preparing it in, say, a watercress soup.

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Wild leeks, or ramps, are one of the first foraged items to appear in high-end farmers' markets in the spring. In some places, the forest floor is literally covered with ramps. As you move north though, the ramps become more elusive. To find them, enter the woods—wild leeks like maple forests—and look for a plant with two palm-like leaves flopping over. The plant has a white bulb not far under the surface and easily pulled out. The whole plant should be eaten after frying it up in some olive oil and salt and nothing more. With standard foraging etiquette, it should only be taken when plentiful. I once found four wild leeks on Martha's Vineyard, right near that slew of watercress. Having never found them before, I let myself take one of them, even though there were so few. The next day I came back and the rest were gone, which got me steamed about the idea of another forager cleaning out the patch. Hopefully that forager was a deer or a hungry rabbit.

America abounds with wild grapes—along highways, crawling up the trees along rivers, and at the edges of fields and cemeteries where trees start. I have stopped getting my hopes up to find sweet Dionysian bunches of grapes hiding under their big leaves at the end of summer, and turned

instead to a much more consistent food source from this wild plant—the leaves themselves. These offer a wide range of culinary possibilities and always seem to be a pleasant surprise on the forager’s table. This is probably because everyone has heard of them as a food and so it is less scary than showing up with boiled milkweed shoots. And still there is the novelty—stuffed grape leaves are not what the forager is expected to show up with. Most people have no idea of the number of wild grape plants they pass by on every highway trip.



Grape leaves. Some are pointed, some are more rounded like these, but all grapes leaves have a glossier upper side and a softer and whiter underside, and the climbing stems always fork into two tendrils.

Grape leaves are best in early summer when they are large but still young and light green. Look for the tendrils that help the plant climb up onto other plants (a clever bit of

evolution—instead of forming a costly sturdy trunk, they just climb up someone else’s). Grape tendrils fork into exactly two branches, and the grape leaves are pointed like maple leaves. The top side of the leaf is smooth, the underside textured by the leaf veins. Harvest the leaves by breaking them off right at the point where the leaf stem connects with the leaf proper.

Stuffed Wild Grape Leaves

Boil 20 wild grape leaves in an inch of water for about 5 minutes to tenderize them. Then, cool them under cold running water. With the rougher side facing up, stuff the leaves with a heaping tablespoon of a mixture of cooked rice, quinoa, any chopped mixed wild greens (lamb’s quarters and lady’s thumb are out at the same time as grape leaves), onions, and salt and pepper. Roll by first folding over the sides and then rolling up in the other direction. Pack them into the bottom of a soup pot and just cover with water. Cook on the stovetop on low heat for about 30 minutes. Serve warm or cold, either plain or with a dipping sauce like tahini.

Along the highways, autumn olive bushes, with their silvery leaves and red berries covered with tiny silver dots, can also be found in abundance. This is a classic red-berry plant that most people, not knowing what it is, will assume to be poisonous. On the contrary, this plant is a forager's dream. In the early fall, these bushes are loaded with red berries, and using nothing but a plastic grocery bag and two hands (although four is better), it is a simple matter to strip off quarts of them in 15 minutes or so. They can be eaten directly, but if they are too sour, they can come home with you and be turned into a sauce or a jam. I gather so many of these berries that every serving of oatmeal I have in the winter is flavored by autumn olive puree. The seeds are harmless but should be removed for a smoother sauce. They are separated easily by sending the berries through a food mill. Autumn olive is an invasive species and easily grows in nutrient- and nitrogen-poor soils. These plants are fast growers and sometimes are planted by highway departments to quickly decorate the areas around exit ramps and interchanges.

Road trips to the beach open up another world of foraging possibilities. Beach peas, which look and taste like

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regular garden peas, are edible, although some sources recommend cooking them first since there are trace amounts of toxins in them (there are trace amounts of toxins in most of the plants we consume, as these are the plants' defenses).



The abundant white flowers of Prunus maritima, the native beach plum. In May, certain stretches of New England beaches are covered with these white flowers, which means you should come back with your pail in August to collect the delicious plums.

A popular summer spot for New Yorkers is Fire Island, the skinny island off the southern coast of Long Island. There are many quirks that make this island memorable. One is the large deer population, which is a constant hot debate item among the human inhabitants. Another is the island's layout. Since the island is only about a quarter mile wide and about 20 miles long, exploring it is a linear expedition, occasionally obstructed by chain-link gated communities but generally offering a pleasant flow of varying ecosystems and beach architecture. And of course, there is the plant life. The occasional blueberry bush gets some of the tourists excited, but what will get me back there are the plumpest and juiciest black cherries I have ever seen (more on black cherries in Chapter 9) and the abundance of beach plums.

Some wild edibles, such as highbush cranberry, have a misleading name (highbush cranberry is not a real cranberry, and not as good[§]), but the beach plum is a real

§ Still, highbush cranberry is a common urban shrub that has berries late into the season when others are gone. Even though the taste can be challenging, I compare this to discovering a nutmeg seed for the first time and trying to see past its extreme bitterness. Someone found a way to make it great.

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plum (*Prunus maritima*). This is important because it helps people identify the plant. The same white film that you rub from supermarket plums appears on the beach plum, and the flesh and pit look the same. The beach plum is smaller in size, but exceeds cultivated plums in the intensity of flavor. Beach plum jelly is a common preparation, but this is such a tasty little guy that you shouldn't stop there. As long as the plums, which sometimes abundantly cover the waist-high shrubs that they grow on, are ripe, fill up your foraging bags and let your culinary ideas range free on your walk home.

One fall, I found myself at a conference along the rocky New England coast. I learned on arrival, around 2 p.m., that no food was going to be served until dinnertime. Being a vegetarian grazer, I eat all the time, so I panicked slightly. I had collected a bag of autumn olives, but I wanted some variety, so I took a walk along the beach. It was late fall, so most of the green plants were gone. There were some rose hips that I munched on. But two other finds that afternoon deserve special mention.

The first was seaweed. On the Northeast coast, almost all of the seaweeds are edible. The omnipresent rockweed

—the blackish seaweed that attaches to rocks and is covered in air bladders that cause it to float to the surface during high tide—is edible but not particularly good. If you want to eat it, I recommend drying it and smashing it up, or putting a little bit in a blender for a soup.



Cutting a piece of kelp to take home. Seaweed extends the foraging season into winter, when this picture was taken.

Kelp, which comes in thick, long, rubbery sheets, is tough but can be eaten on the spot. This is the edible that I came across and that helped hold me over until dinner that night. Another great seaweed to eat on the spot is sea lettuce, which is translucent green with a light, wispy

texture. Low tides allow you to explore below the shoreline and find fresh specimens, but commercial harvesters use boats to harvest near the shore. All seaweeds are packed with B vitamins and are therefore an especially good foraging choice for vegans.

The next edible I stumbled upon while trying to stave off hunger that day was a cantaloupe. No one needs to be taught cantaloupe, so this plant is not found in foraging books. But apparently, a summer beachgoer had eaten one, leaving the seeds behind, and the sandy conditions were adequate for a cantaloupe plant to emerge and bear a smallish fruit with salty flesh. The point here is that once the foraging mentality takes over, you will always be on the lookout for edibles. This salted cantaloupe was a great find for a hungry forager, as have been perfectly good peanuts after a ball game, Goobers after a movie, and pumpkins all over the city in the weeks after Halloween. Keep your eyes out for asparagus too: it has escaped cultivation many times over the years of domestication and pops up in the strangest places.

Teas

If it is caffeine you want in your hot beverages, foraging is not going to help you, unless you count swiping a few extra tea bags from corporate functions. But, if you are an herbal-tea drinker, a few hours of tea foraging spread over the course of the spring, summer, and fall can provide you with enough tea for the whole year.

The main tea plant I forage is wild mint, which is easy to identify because of its smell and because all mints have square stems. Mint likes moist soils, and I find it most often along shallow river banks. Where it grows, it grows abundantly, and the whole plant can be plucked and dried for tea. Linden flowers are also excellent for tea, as are dried crab apples.

Goldenrod pops up throughout the city, and if you find a patch in a good-looking place, grab some leaves and flowers. Goldenrod is a little bitter, but when mixed with more pleasant-tasting herbs like mint and stinging nettles (found sporadically in cities), it is fine. Also, goldenrod is reported to be useful for treating the common cold, flu, allergies, and arthritis, as well as for lowering blood

pressure, so I gladly accept a little bitterness.

Where goldenrod grows, mugwort grows too. In fact, there is probably enough mugwort to make every city dweller wealthy if the plant had any economic value. Mugwort has some reported hallucinogenic properties (its genus, *Artemisia*, is also the genus of wormwood, the plant used to make absinthe), and so I use it sparingly. It is said to promote vivid dreams if consumed before bedtime, or if a bundle of it is placed under your pillow, but I have not yet tried this so I cannot verify it.

Another plant that seems to appear on every patch of grass that hasn't been blasted with herbicides is clover. The three leaves and robust white or purple flower make it easy to identify. When collecting clover, I usually pop a flower or two into my mouth for the nutrients (the taste of clover flowers is a firm mediocre) and then bag a bunch of them for tea.

Walking along dirt paths, you'll sometimes see little yellow flowers at your feet that are shaped like miniature pineapples. Strangely enough, when crushed they smell like pineapple too. This is pineapple weed, considered an invasive in some states. It is great as tea (it is related to

chamomile). If you know of a raspberry or blackberry patch, those leaves, when dried, can also be used for tea.

These are the main plants that I find in the cities for making tea. In all cases, dry them before using. Drying helps them store well, and, perhaps counter-intuitively, can improve their flavor. In drying, the cell walls become brittle, and when reconstituted, they break open and release more flavor. I find that foraged teas require more herb matter than commercially bought teas, which are specifically selected for their strong flavors. For best flavor, use a lot of the herbs. Go heavy on the mint and then combine any to all of the above for a one-of-a-kind local tea.

-Chapter 8-

**Cattails:
Some Personal Issues, Some Prospects, and
Some Tastier Contemporaneous Plants**

Around the time when grape leaves are big enough to collect, cattails are shooting up out of marshy areas and, like grape leaves, they are at the right size: big enough to collect but not so mature that they are too tough. Cattails in a city environment are often best admired rather than eaten because the water they sit in can look a little scary. They never seem to mind though—I've seen them happily taking over oil-slicked, stagnant water in several different places. I usually let those go. To be honest, this has more to do with my general feeling about cattails than with my fear of polluted habitats. Yet, a small amount

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of poking around the web or through wild plant books verifies that cattails, like milkweed, are considered a forager's treasure trove, offering a variety of food parts throughout the entire year. (In the cold months, as long as the ice is not too thick, the brave and the crazy foragers can plunge their hands down into the muck to harvest cattail rhizomes for starch.) This plant was used heavily by Native Americans for food, weaving, fires, and medicine. But, try as I do, I have yet to fall in love with the cattail. Maybe I just expect too much from a plant that gets so much attention in the foraging literature. Still, it is an easy-to-find food source, so I will give it some space and stuff my opinions down there in the muck.

There are a couple of easy parts of cattails to enjoy, which don't necessitate a cold plunge into the mud. No part of the plant is poisonous; the trick instead is to isolate the parts of the plants that go down the easiest. Since the leaves of the mature plants were used by Native Americans to weave thatched huts, it is a good guess that these leaves are not a good edible. However, the inner core of the young plants, when they are up to three or four feet tall, is soft and white and makes a good addition to hot soups. The stalk



Cattails grow in marshy areas. Urban marshy areas are likely to be polluted so not great cattail foraging spots.

cores can be obtained by cutting the plant at the base or firmly yanking the inner leaves straight upward (bend at the knees). The core is less stringy than the outer leaves. You can try it raw, but it leaves a scratchiness in my throat like evening primrose roots do. Better to chop it small and mix it into a soup. To eat the next part, the brown corndog-looking thing at the top that is the most recognizable part of the cattail, we have to wait for another month of summer to pass. When the plants reach about five feet tall, keep an eye out for a swelling under the leaves near the top of the plant.

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This is the developing flower spike, and you want to harvest it when it has swollen to a centimeter or so but is still covered by the leaves. Peeling back the leaves reveals that there are two parts to the cattail-corn dog, the upper corn dog (male) and the lower corn dog (female). Both are edible and are best if boiled for 10 minutes and then seasoned and eaten right off the stick like corn-on-the-cob. Cattail is a prolific plant and it is fine to harvest lots of it. They have been here for a long time and they benefit from the thinning anyhow.

If you go away for a week in the beginning of summer, changes are everywhere in the local plant life upon your return. The cattails have added a couple inches and the knotweed plants have probably added even more than that. Unopened milkweed flower buds, in what I call their broccoli stage, have suddenly opened into pink flower clusters. These flowers do not make it into vases since they are not striking enough and do not have long supportive stems, but if they were judged on scent alone, they would be plucked more often. They are also edible, but since taking them reduces the number of pods the plant will bear a month later, and because the pods are a much better food,



Milkweed at the "broccoli" stage, right before the flowers emerge. These flower buds can be boiled and eaten.

I do not usually bother with the flowers. If you care to try some, first dip the flower bunches in boiling water for about a minute, then run them under cold water and add them to a salad.

As the milkweed flowers begin to die, I start making weekly visits to the milkweed patches around town. This is midsummer: things are growing fast and I do not want to let the milkweed pods get too big. Milkweed pods are only

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good for eating when they are young, up to about two inches. Beyond that, the fibers inside get too tough. I once ruined a vegetable casserole thinking the fibers from large pods might mellow out and turn into some luxurious, velvety substance. I thought I had read that somewhere. Well, they didn't mellow out and because I don't like to throw things away I ended up with a pretty chewy vegetable casserole that took me weeks to work through.

When you gather the young pods, your hands will get sticky, but often there is a waterway nearby for rinsing. Good foraging etiquette applies here—take only a small fraction of all that you find—particularly because this is where monarch butterflies lay their eggs. When you get the pods home, boil them for about 10 minutes to drive away the bitterness. At this point they can be added to stir-fries (they make a good substitute for okra, so I like to use them in Indian curries) and they can also be frozen and reheated later. The season is a little short for the milkweed pods, so I like to freeze some since I consider them a top wild edible. I imagine that a fun way to prepare them (after the 10-minute boil and drain) would be as vegan Jalapeno



Milkweed pods in a range of sizes, from about one to two inches long. The entire pod is edible after boiling in water for 10 minutes and draining.

poppers, with the white seed silk inside acting as a cheese substitute, but as I have not tried this yet, I leave the details to the culinary adventurers.

You will continue to see milkweed pods through the remainder of summer and fall, when they crack and let their seeds out into the wind. But the milkweed as a food source is finished until next spring, when the on-the-ball foragers come back to find the first milkweed shoots.

One of the most popular and highly cultivated garden perennials (over 60,000 reported cultivars!) is the daylily.

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Some states list the common daylily as a noxious weed, which just means that foragers can find it more easily and don't need to worry at all about taking it. Unopened, the buds make an interesting addition to stir-fries and soups, and the dried, opened flowers are sold in Chinese grocery stores as *golden needles*. The tubers and early shoots are also edible.

A small fraction of the population (around 5%) is reported to be allergic to the plant. It seems as though the jury is still out on this, however, and it could be that instead, a small fraction of the cultivars cause allergic reactions (upset stomach). For the flowers, one trick may be to remove the stamens and pistils, but this is not a guarantee. Once, I broke up with a girlfriend and ate some daylilies the same day, and apparently I am in the 5%. That didn't make for a very fun night. So, I considered not including this plant, but it really does show up everywhere around the city and the many buds each plant produces are just calling out to be thinned and eaten. So, approach it with caution: try a bite of a single cooked bud first and gradually become more adventurous. If you find that you tolerate and

enjoy this plant, as people have for thousands of years, you have at your hands a reliable urban food source.

While daylilies are planted in gardens for their visual beauty but also happen to be edible, many plants in the garden that creep in, unwanted by gardeners, are equally prized for their edibility. Such is purslane, which should be considered a prized vegetable and not an aggressive weed. It is crunchy, mild, and slightly salty. It can tolerate compacted soils and might even prefer them, since I often find the plant thriving out of sidewalk cracks rather than in the nicer-looking dirt patches close by. Found all over the world, purslane is used in Indian cuisine, and aboriginal Australians use its seeds to make seed cakes. When people yank out purslane from their garden beds or spray it with weed killer, they are killing the best vegetable source of Omega-3 fatty acids out there.

Purslane is a low succulent ground creeper, with reddish stems and shiny, green paddle-shaped leaves. It likes warmer weather and waits until summer to come out. The stems and leaves can be plucked all summer and eaten raw or cooked, although I almost always cook mine since I gather it in the city and it gives me peace of mind to boil or

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sauté plants that I pull right from ground level. Purslane can be stored by pickling or, even more easily, by boiling it for a few minutes, straining it, and freezing it in mason jars. Since sometimes people intentionally grow purslane as a ground cover, it can be difficult to tell when it is okay to help yourself to purslane growing in someone's garden. Once while walking down a quiet back street in Boston, I noticed a well-tended vegetable garden with a pile of recently weeded purslane piled up at the edge of the plot. That was an easy bunch to decide upon. A trickier patch I came across the same day was purslane growing out of a gravel cover. I immediately concluded the gravel cover was an indication that the owner of the building had tried to cover up the only patch of dirt on his property, to make his life easier, and so I was ready to hit that purslane patch. However, friends with me at the time suggested that maybe the plants were put there on purpose, since they can grow in poor and rocky soil, and maybe this owner was trying to re-greenify his property one small plant at a time. I was doubtful, but erred on the side of optimism and let those purslane plants go.



Purslane growing in some compacted, sandy soil. This entire plant can be plucked and eaten raw or cooked.

A walk in the summertime through city streets, with nothing but a few plastic grocery bags stuffed in your pockets, can yield a meal that embraces the randomness of foraging. Maybe you take a longer route from point A to point B, and as a result you come across a big healthy patch of lamb's quarters; or you go through a little park and find a small stand of cattails or an abandoned garden plot full of purslane. I enjoy these foraging surprises, and I like not knowing what will become the centerpiece of my next meal. When I have time, I try to take the long way home.

Weeding Urban Gardens

Garden space in cities is forever in short supply. I got lucky once: I called the phone number posted at the urban garden near my apartment and was given a plot right away. Someone had left the plot just then, and I must have called at the perfect time. In all of my other attempts though, there has been too long a wait and I've moved before getting that awaited phone call.

Enter the urban forager, a.k.a. the urban weeder. It would be easier to list the garden weeds that are inedible, since most of the plants that people pluck from their gardens are perfectly fit for the dinner table. Many edible weeds have fun names, like shepherd's purse, lamb's quarters, lady's thumb, chickweed, and quickweed. Shepherd's purse, with toothed leaves that look vaguely like dandelion, is named for the seed pods that are shaped like hearts, or, to someone more imaginative, like shepherd's purses. Two types of sorrel, a lemony-tasting plant, are commonly found on lawns and in gardens: wood sorrel (called clovers by nearly everyone, although the three leaves are heart-shaped, which is not true for clovers) and

sheep sorrel (which my nieces and nephew call sour fish because of the lemony taste and the leaf shape).

Plantain, not related at all to the banana-like tropical fruit (except that they are both plants), was known as the white-man's footprints by Native Americans because it came over with the Europeans and followed them aggressively. It is found everywhere there is dirt. Young specimens can be eaten raw, but I usually cook this plant or make a pesto with it since the leaves are pretty tough and stringy. Two types of plantain are common, the broad leaf variety and the narrow leaf variety, each with about five stringy veins running parallel from the base of the leaf to its tip. Chickweed is a crunchy plant that can be eaten in its entirety—flowers, leaves, stems and all—and makes a good raw addition to salads. Peppergrass, which does not look like grass at all, sends up stems in a cactus-like formation. These stems are covered with peppery seeds that can be stripped off with the teeth and enjoyed on the spot or saved for a peppery addition to meals.

If we round out the section on weeding urban gardens by mentioning that all grasses are edible (although here we are stretching into survival food: only young grasses are

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digestible, after which the best thing to do is send them through a juicer to make a wheatgrass shot), we conclude that a large fraction of the unwanted plants in gardens are fine for consumption. Just be sure to pass over any bitter nightshade (the pretty plant with red and green berries and purple and yellow flowers commonly found trailing up fences—much easier on the eyes than on the palate).

-Chapter 9-

City Fruits

A table, a chair, a bowl of fruit and a violin; what else does a man need to be happy?

Albert Einstein

I have spent a fair amount of mental effort trying to understand why homeowners, when they decide to plant a tree, choose something other than a fruit tree. I guess I've boiled it down to the not-too-revelatory: obtaining food directly from the land around you is not the first thing on most people's minds. Still, a fruit tree versus a non-fruit tree to me is just too easy. They are both strong

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and climbable and provide shade and beauty; one gives sweet food, like apples or cherries or peaches or pears, and the other does not; and fruit trees are not any more expensive. In 1863, at Fruitland Nurseries in August, Georgia, P. J. Berckmans was selling apple trees for 40 cents each, plum and quince trees for 50 cents, and 10 dollars would get you 100 grape vines. Maybe if these prices were still the going rate, people might plant more of them. On the bright side, the shortage of fruit trees makes the hunt more challenging, and challenges keep us all going. Who wants a utopian fruit-tree-filled society where all we do is sit around and play music, enjoy great books and movies, and munch on peaches? No challenge there to distract us from ourselves.

John Chapman's life vocation was to plant apple seeds across Pennsylvania and west across Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. During his lifetime he became known as Johnny Appleseed. He gathered seeds from cider mills and, packing them onto his back, traveled around to help people start orchards. He returned to the mills again in the fall and repeated the cycle many times throughout his life, checking back on his previously planted orchards for maintenance

and to offer guidance. He wanted for nothing and remained a homeless wanderer his whole life. By planting so many apple trees, he provided food, drink, and vinegar—a much needed preservative in the 1800s—to the Midwest.

Harming any of God’s creatures was out of the question for Johnny Appleseed—he practiced Swedenborgianism, a Christian theology which emphasizes leading a good, charitable life. As a result, Appleseed forbade even pruning apple trees. Of course, if you are mainly growing apples for vinegar and cider, it is not important to have large apples, and so pruning would not be necessary.

In order to produce an apple tree bearing the same variety of apples as an existing tree, grafting is necessary. Planting the seeds of a Macintosh will not yield a Macintosh, but some likely highly inferior apple. Grafting involves cutting a limb from one tree and attaching it to another tree, which, of course, Johnny Appleseed would not tolerate. He planted all his trees directly from seeds. The result was thousands of trees with fruit that today would be considered low quality and essentially worthless, although fine for making hard cider, which was a very popular

beverage in the 1700–1800s. John Adams started out every morning with a mug of it.

We now find ourselves walking down the street on a late summer day, and we spot an apple tree. If this tree is in a yard, it is probably the result of grafting, and therefore probably has good eating apples. On the other hand, if this tree grows on the side of a river or some other out-of-the-way spot, it could be from someone's tossed apple core, and then all bets are off. An apple may be plump and bright red, but too sour to enjoy. Or it could be small and unremarkable-looking, but taste sweet. These mystery trees make for fun guessing, and even if the taste is not great, the apples can still be used for something. When I find a tasty one, I open up my backpack and pack in as many as I can carry. Even living in a city with relatively few apple trees, I can keep a constant supply, having an apple a day from August to mid-November. I try to stay calm when I see people buying bananas and oranges during this great fall fruit period, but it's hard sometimes, and I find myself holding back the urge to let them know that there are six apple trees within six blocks of here currently yielding

perfect apples, fruits that hold no stigma of food-miles or banana republic exploitation.

Apples store very well in the crisper drawers of your refrigerator, but if you find enough, you will need to turn to some other storage techniques. One method is to dry them. For this, slice the apples into 1/8-inch slices, put them on a cooling rack or a cookie sheet lined with parchment paper, and place them in an oven for a few hours on low heat—around 200°F—with the oven door cracked to let the moisture out. Or use a food dehydrator. Applesauce is a more common preservation technique, and you can alter any recipe you find to make it as sweet or spiced as you like.

Many of the apples found in cities are crab apples, which is the common term for any wild apple, but in particular refers to small and sour apples. I wish I had a use for every crab apple I come across, but I cannot keep up with them all. There is one variety though, the Hopa Crab, that is the queen of crab apples. Introduced in 1920 by the South Dakota Agricultural Experimental Station, it is bright, reddish pink all the way through and makes beautiful crab-apple jelly and crab-apple butter. Both can be

made from the same batch, and no pectin is needed for the jelly since apples come with their own supply of pectin.

Gather a bag full of crab apples—at least enough to fill up your biggest cooking pot halfway. Put them in the pot whole and add just enough water to cover the apples. Cover the pot and bring to a boil, simmering for about 20 minutes. During this time, the water will become infused with the sweet tartness of the apples and pectin. Pour the apples and liquid through a colander, catching the liquid in another pot. You will use the liquid to make the jelly, and the apples, which still have plenty of flavor, to make the apple butter. For the jelly, add about a cup of sugar to every three cups of liquid and bring the mixture to jelly stage (which you can read off of a candy thermometer) on a pot on the stove. Grandmothers and other jelly makers have no need for a candy thermometer here, but I can't seem to get it right without one. Either way, at the jelly stage, remove the pot from the heat and pour the hot liquid carefully into sterilized canning jars. An easy way to sterilize jars is to fill them one quarter of the way with water and microwave them for 10 minutes. Put the lids in boiling water on the stove while the jars are in the microwave.

To make the apple butter, a food mill is necessary to efficiently separate the apple pulp from the seeds and skin. Send the warm apples through the mill and add some sugar and spices—cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, ginger, allspice (a departure from local-only food with this all-out embrace of the Indian spice trade)—and cook the puree over low heat for about 10 minutes. Then spoon the crab-apple butter into the sterilized canning jars. One crab-apple tree often yields enough crabs to keep you eating crab-apple jelly and butter every day of the year. I have never seen anyone else harvesting crab apples, so if you fall in love with this fruit, you are all set. Substitute local honeys or maple syrup for white sugar and use mint or rosemary as spices for a more local version of these goods.

Urban areas contain a variety of cherry trees. In the name of biodiversity and beauty, this is, I suppose, a good thing, but selfishly, I wish a lot more of them were sour cherries. The sour-cherry tree, which has been in cultivation for over 2000 years, shows the flowering beauty of the fruitless flowering cherries so common in urban areas but then yields plump and delicious fruits in the summertime. By keeping my eyes peeled, I have been fortunate enough

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to find three of these within a couple of miles from where I live, compared with probably about 100 flowering cherries.

The native cherry species, the black cherry, is a common urban tree. This species grows quite tall and, while often full of fruit, goes unnoticed by most people. The fruits of the black cherry come in large clusters, but the cherries are quite small, and mostly pit. They often don't taste great either, and so I usually don't harvest them in bulk.



Black cherries hang in clusters. These clusters have been picked over by birds. Black cherries from different trees have wildly different tastes, so don't give up on them if you first happen upon some lousy ones.

Sometimes though, I stumble across a black cherry with plump and tasty fruits, and then I eat my fill there and pack some away for later. Boiled briefly and then sent through a food mill, these native blacks produce juice that can add nice color and tartness to jams, cocktails, or baked goods.

About the same size as a black cherry, and with a similar color, is the berry of the black nightshade plant. Eyebrows raise and ears perk up at the mention of eating this. But black nightshade is merely one of a number of edible nightshades. Popular nightshades include eggplant, tomato, and potato. Still, when a plant's common name includes the word *nightshade*, warning bells go off. This makes sense: the unripe berries of the black nightshade are in fact poisonous, and the deadly nightshade, a different plant altogether, is highly toxic. But the ripe berries of the black nightshade are not poisonous.

In Massachusetts, where I live, I have never found a deadly nightshade plant, although apparently they are around. Black nightshades, on the other hand, are quite common, and despite misinformation about this plant disseminated on the web, this is a perfectly edible plant. It is eaten all over the world and makes quite a pleasant

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snack, or a berry pie if you can find enough. Some people cook and eat the young leaves, but I like the berries so I wait for them.

To make sure you have black nightshade and not deadly nightshade, well, a field guide is recommended (although the field guide will probably tell you to avoid black nightshade altogether). Briefly though, the key distinguishing feature that I use is that black nightshade flowers and berries come in clusters of three or more (the stems are connected at the base). In contrast, deadly nightshade berries appear individually. Black nightshade leaves are often eaten by insects and thus peppered with small holes. The flowers of the black nightshade are white with five petals that bend back slightly at the tips. These details should be confirmed with an illustrated field guide, but if there are clusters of small berries, if the plant is a knee-high herbaceous annual, and if the berries start off a firm green and then ripen to a dark charcoal color—transitioning with pretty green stripes along the way—it is likely a black nightshade. After confirming, taste a berry that has ripened fully. It should be dark and soft, with a thin



Black nightshade berries grow in clusters and ripen at different times. Here the ones in the foreground are ready to eat, but the rear ones, still green, should not be eaten, as they are poisonous at this stage.

taut skin. The whole berry is edible raw and tastes a lot like a husk tomato, which is also called ground cherry.

We have gone from black cherries to black nightshade berries, two fun and lesser-known urban fruits. Meanwhile, as the summer wears on, a real gem is quietly ripening along every day: the peach.

Urban peaches present an interesting dilemma for the forager. One has to balance between letting them ripen on the tree to perfection and getting a few before someone else

takes them all. This always happens, with every peach tree I know in the city. One day the peaches are looking pretty good (and I'm restricting myself to only the fallen ones, even when they've already been half eaten by some other critter), and the next morning every last one of those peaches is gone. Applied mathematicians do research on this "optimal harvest problem" because it is not clear what the best strategy is: wait one more day for an increase in the size and quality of the harvest, or harvest today to avoid the possible single catastrophic event, like a frost, that destroys the whole crop. In the urban peach-tree scenario, the catastrophic event is the onslaught of old ladies sneaking out in the middle of the night and swiping all of the peaches. Apparently they don't get hung up on the math. Anyhow, grab a few peaches when you find a tree in an okay spot and don't neglect the ones that have fallen to the ground, because these are usually the ripest and juiciest ones the tree has to offer. That's why they have fallen.

Most foraging books do not include apples, pears and peaches, apparently because everyone knows them, but for me, omitting them would be strange since they constitute the bulk of the food I forage at summer's end. A haul of

apples or pears provides plenty of great nutrition for weeks. No one needs a picture to learn an apple, but people can use the reminder to keep their eyes peeled for fruit trees. The best wild-urban apple tree I know of gets passed by thousands of cars and hundreds of pedestrians every day, but no one sees it. It sits in a median strip adjacent to an overpass and across the street from a bike path, and it gives big, juicy, crisp red apples virtually bug-free for two months straight. The point is that you do not know how good a randomly placed off-the-path apple tree will be until you try it. Over the decades, magnanimous people have planted high-quality varieties in strange places, so keep your eyes up and walk instead of cycling if you have the time, since you see a lot more that way.

Another fall fruit, unknown to most people but a great edible nonetheless, is the Kousa dogwood. Most dogwoods yield black or red bitter and poisonous berries, but the Kousa yields a larger orange-colored fruit, about the size of a super ball, with a distinct hexagonal-tiled pattern on the skin and a circular indent at the center of each hexagon. The tree is a medium shrub and usually a lot of the fruits are easily reached by hand. The fruits are reddish orange

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Early Kousa dogwood fruits. These are not ripe yet, since they are still green, but when they get reddish orange and soft, they will be ready for eating. Just avoid the hard seeds inside.

and, when ripe, a bit soft to the touch. The skin itself is gritty and a little bitter, which most people find objectionable, but I eat the fruits whole, just being careful to avoid and spit out the rock-hard seeds within. The inside is a soft, orange flesh that is sweet. As with lots of plants though, the taste of the fruit differs dramatically from tree to tree, and sometimes the fruit is dry and bitter and not worth eating even when ripe. If those are the first Kousa fruits you find, you will not have the motivation to try them

**Whole-Wheat Kousa Muffins
with Chocolate Chips**

½ cup vegetable oil
¾ cup brown sugar
1 cup Kousa dogwood puree

1 ½ cups whole wheat-flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon cinnamon
½ cup chocolate chips

Spray mini muffin tins with vegetable oil. Beat together the oil and sugar and mix in the Kousa puree (instructions for making the puree can be found in the text, just below this recipe). In a separate bowl, mix flour, baking soda, and cinnamon. Combine all ingredients in a large bowl until just mixed. Pour the batter into the muffin tins. Bake at 350°F for about 20 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean.

again, but you should. Usually Kousa fruits are good, occasionally they are very good, and sometimes they are even seedless.

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Kousa dogwood is planted as an ornamental, and the owners typically have no idea that its fruits are edible. Native to Eastern Asia, this tree is now widespread across the United States. In early autumn, a healthy tree can be loaded with easy-to-gather fruits. And so, as with many foraged items, there is a desire to come up with some way to use the fruits en masse. Sending freshly picked, ripe fruits through a food mill removes all of the seeds and most of the skin, producing Kousa puree, which is orange and goopy and not too attractive, reminiscent either of baby-food or uni (sea urchin roe), depending on your frame of reference. But it makes a great snack when turned into whole-wheat Kousa muffins with chocolate chips. Other imaginative uses are merely kitchen experiments away.

Schnapps

Schnapps is made by infusing plant matter in vodka, and adding schnapps-making to your activity roster greatly expands the number of forageable plants on your list. One might not think that young oak branches or the soft, gray pussy-willow catkins have much foraging value, but steep these in vodka for a few months and voila: a distinct aperitif and a fun guessing game for your guests. Other common urban plants you can use for making schnapps include hawthorns, crab apples, basil, dandelion flowers and roots, linden and rose flowers, and Saint-John's-wort, which makes one of the finest kinds of schnapps there is. Saint-John's-wort is a knee-high plant with yellow flowers, which have tiny translucent dots on them that you can see if you hold the plant up to the sun. The leaves have these dots too. Over the thousands of years that the Danes and the Germans and the Swedes have been infusing grain alcohols, probably every plant has been tried, and instructions—which basically amount to how long you infuse the vodka and how long you let the infusion sit after straining out the plant matter—abound on

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the web. The general rule is that flowers need only a few days for infusion and then up to a couple of weeks for mellowing time. Fruits, on the other hand, take months, exceeded only by oak schnapps, the true test of patience, which steeps for one year and then mellows for another six months. An online search for any of these plants (plus hundreds of others) together with the word “schnapps” will provide the details. Happy foraging, and bottoms up!

-Chapter 10-

**Going After the Acorns,
Maybe a Little Nuts**

Fall is the time of fruits and nuts. Although most chestnuts in America were wiped out in the early 20th century by a fungus, there are still many nut trees growing in the States. Black walnuts, hickories, and acorns make up the primary nuts foragers go after. In the cities, we focus on the acorn, the nut of the oak tree. City arborists prefer the hard oak species over the white oaks, and the common opinion is that these hard oak acorns have more tannins and thus require more processing to remove the bitterness, but this is not supported by a careful investigation. The truth is that all acorns require a fair amount of processing, and rather than providing a general

rule, each acorn batch should instead be tasted along the way to figure out how much boiling and straining needs to be done to make the acorns palatable. It is the processing required that keeps acorns from being a popular food, but when the world collapses, acorns of all types will surge in popularity. For now, acorns are kicked around on bike trails, hoarded away by squirrels, gobbled down whole by geese, but rarely collected and eaten by humans, even though they constitute an easy-to-identify and plentiful food source. Maybe one day a cultivar will be produced that yields big edible acorns requiring no leaching. Until then, we deal with acorns as follows.

Gather acorns that have fallen to the ground. Take a lot of them and, sometime in the next few days, set up a spot with a hard surface, a couple of bowls, a hammer (or a Davebilt nutcracker, a good choice for acorns), some music, and as many friends as you can convince to help. Each acorn needs a solid whack, enough to split the shell but not to pulverize the nut meat inside. Then, the nut meat can be separated from the shells. The right style of hammering and splitting will make it so that you can generally get the acorn meat out of the shell without too much effort. (If an acorn

seems like it will be a difficult one, I just throw it away since the bowl of acorns sitting in front of me is usually pretty daunting.) Meanwhile, bring a very large pot of water to boil. This will serve as the hot water reserve; the acorns need to be boiled in several changes of water to leach out the tannins. Crush the acorns by chopping them coarsely in a food processor or by hand. This will expose more surface area and thus get the tannins out faster, though it will still take a while. In a smaller pot, one that easily fits all of your acorns, cover them with twice as much hot water and boil for 10 minutes. Strain and repeat this process about five times. Each time, the water should turn less brown as the tannins leach out. After the final boil, place the acorns on a cookie sheet and heat in an oven on low heat, about 200°F, for a couple of hours to thoroughly dry them (if you were to dry them out in the sun, squirrels would come for a snack). Or you could freeze them in mason jars without drying. The acorn meats can then be ground into a flour or salted and used for a snack. I have also skipped the toasting process and added the boiled acorns directly to soups.

In some years, the number of acorns produced by oak trees skyrockets. These are called mast years, *mast* being

the botanical word for fruit produced by woody plants. An extreme example of a mast year is a bamboo species in northeastern India that flowers and fruits once every 48 years. Oak trees mast much more frequently, and the mechanism by which they do so is worth describing, being one of those astounding evolutionary explanations.

First, a related tangent. I once asked a friend of mine, who at the time made a living playing online poker, how to go from being just a good poker player to one who could make a reliable income of it. What was his secret? He thought for a moment and said, “Randomization.” Apparently, you need to be able to randomize your play so that the other players do not know if you are bluffing or not. So, after mastering the methods in the poker books, you need to become an expert at mentally flipping coins to produce unpredictable variation in your game. As another example, take the game rock-paper-scissors. Imagine you are on a deserted island with someone, and you need a break from foraging. You might decide to play a few weeks of rock-paper-scissors. Eventually, assuming your opponent is moderately sharp, the only way you won’t lose most of the time is if you play randomly. Otherwise, your opponent

will be able to predict what you will do and therefore beat you.

Oak acorn production is an example of a randomized strategy that has been evolutionarily selected for. If oak trees produced the same number of acorns each year, the population of forest creatures that relies on acorns as a primary food source, like squirrels, could stabilize to a level such that all the acorns would be eaten every year. Even if the oaks produced a big crop every 5th year or something, critters would adapt to this. Therefore, the only effective way for oaks to ensure an advantage is to occasionally produce a surprise crop so big that there are not enough squirrels to eat all the acorns. But how does an oak tree produce a surprise crop? By relying on the random timing of the last spring frost. Oaks flower fairly early in spring, and if a frost happens after they flower, most of the flowers die before getting fertilized, and therefore those flowers do not mature into acorns. Most years occur when there is no frost after the oak flowers appear, in which case most of the flowers mature into acorns. Until nature evolves squirrels that can accurately forecast weather years in advance, this

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is a pretty effective way to make the occasional unpredictable bumper crop of acorns.

Acorns are the most labor-intensive food item in this book. But they are everywhere, and some years they appear in great quantities. They provide a good reason for getting together with friends, and the smell and taste of properly leached and roasted acorns makes the time well spent.



By grinding shelled acorns before boiling, you can speed up the leaching process.

Acorn Whole-Wheat Bread

2 ½ cups whole-wheat flour
1 cup water
1 packet yeast
1 tablespoon vital wheat gluten
½ cup leached and coarsely ground acorns
1 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon molasses, honey, or maple syrup

Method 1: Put all ingredients in a bread machine and hit Start.

Method 2: Mix all ingredients until uniform, then knead on a floured surface for 15 minutes, adding flour as needed. Put in a greased bowl and let rise, lightly covered with a damp cloth, for a few hours. Punch down and form into one or two loaves, shape into a boule, or place into loaf pans. Let rise for another hour, and then bake in a 350°F oven for 30 minutes.

-Chapter 11-

Mushrooms

Because some species are deadly poisonous we shun them all. But this makes no more sense than to give up swimming because there are sharks in the ocean; for in forgoing the delights of wild mushroom eating we are unnecessarily depriving ourselves of a truly noble pleasure...Some of the most delicious varieties of wild mushroom are so distinctive in their appearance, so absolutely unmistakable for any other variety, that they can be picked and eaten without the slightest qualm... Mushroom hunting can, indeed, be far safer than ocean swimming. For in the ocean it is the shark, not you, who

selects the menu; and while the shark is notoriously catholic in his tastes, you can pick and choose.

James Nathan Miller, Harper's Magazine, 1962

Mushrooms scare people more than red berries scare people. And this is perfectly reasonable since there are a few mushrooms out there that can cause a quick death. Stories of mushroom poisonings make great news items, and some have even been passed down for centuries. In 1767, in a suburb northeast of Paris, the composer Johann Schobert went mushrooming with his family and took back some mushrooms for his chef to cook. The chef refused since he suspected they were poisonous, and after another chef also refused, Schobert made a soup of them himself. For Schobert and his wife and one of their children, this was their last meal.

These stories are good reminders that mushrooms should be taken seriously, but need not be warnings to stay clear. There are a few common mushrooms that are very easy to identify, with no deadly lookalikes, that provide an excellent meal.

Fall is the prime time for mushrooms. Some mushrooms are around more in the summer, and morels come up in the spring, but most wait for the cooler, damp days of autumn before popping up. Most kinds of mushrooms are saprophytic—they feed off decaying organic matter—and as such, the woods is the place to go mushroom hunting. And hunting it is, for unlike foraging for plants, which can be found in the same place year after year, the search for mushrooms involves something more akin to hunting, with your eyes peeled, never quite knowing when one will show up. Places to look in urban areas include grassy spots, especially public parks with large trees. It is worth repeating the obvious: NEVER eat a mushroom (and this goes for plants too) unless you are sure of what it is and you know it is safe to eat. Even then, if it is your first time eating it, eat only a little to make sure you don't have allergic reactions to it (also good advice for the first time you eat any new plant).

The hen-of-the-woods, *Grifola frondosa*, is the mushroom I hunt for the most during the fall. One hen can be five pounds or more, and I usually end up pickling or freezing large portions of the ones I find. The place to look

for hens is at the base of large oak trees, alive or dead. The mushrooms are nestled right into the base of the tree and are ruffled with many layers. Hens are colored anywhere from yellowish to light brown to a dark gray on top, and paler underneath. They are polypores, which means that instead of the gills you find on the underside of familiar supermarket mushrooms such as the portobello, they have packed-together tubes, or pores, on their undersides. Depending on where and when you find a hen, it can require a fair amount of cleaning since bugs find their way into the nooks. My culinary preparation technique is the same for all mushrooms that I cover in this book: thinly chop and fry with olive oil, garlic, and salt over high heat for about 5 minutes. If I have too many to eat in one meal, I also pickle them by boiling them for 15 minutes in equal parts water and vinegar, adding whatever pickling spices are in my cabinet at the time (like black peppercorns, dill, fennel seeds, tansy flower heads, and northern bay leaves) and then jarring the mixture.[§]

§ I will pickle pretty much anything using this same technique: burdock root, evening primrose root, purslane. Japanese knotweed with red pepper flakes makes a great pickle. Once,



A small chicken mushroom, bright yellow, up high in an old, dead tree.

Another polypore that provides a large meal is the chicken mushroom. This one likes large hardwoods (such as oak or ash) with some damage, like a missing limb. The tree may be upright or fallen down. The chicken mushroom grows right off the side of the tree and consists

a neighbor told me he had gotten his hands on a case of summer squash and wondered if I “could use it.” It was summer squash pickles all winter long.

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of shelves, which are orange on the upper side and yellow underneath. Sometimes a chicken high up in a tree presents a formidable climbing challenge, which I always like since it adds an extra layer of adventure and survival skill to foraging. I also jump fences sometimes since it feels cooler than walking around them.

The chicken mushroom is called so because its flesh strongly resembles white meat in texture, and if prepared in a chicken-like way, you might be able to fool some people. It can also be pickled or stir-fried and frozen.

Sticking with mushrooms named after other foods, the oyster mushroom is another common mushroom growing on dead wood. Oysters like colder weather and can be found in spring and fall. A good place to look for them is on fallen trees and log piles. I found some once on the outskirts of an urban cemetery, where the groundskeepers had piled up some chopped down trees. Since oyster mushrooms can be easily cultivated, they are sold in stores and can therefore be easily learned. The ones found in the wild are usually not quite as white, but structurally they are the same.



Some great looking oyster mushrooms growing in their usual habitat, on fallen trees.

The puffball is another edible mushroom that is very easy to identify. There are different types of puffballs, some growing into a very large white ball, and others staying smaller than a golf ball. The rule is: if a puffball is white all the way through and soft, like a marshmallow, it is edible. Some puffballs found in the woods are purplish black inside, and they should definitely not be eaten. Some young puffballs are white but hard—these should also be avoided because they are poisonous. Slice puffballs through to

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check the inside when you find them (although you will be slicing them for cooking when you get home, it's better to



Sometimes puffballs come very large. This one looked just like the moon. As long as they are white all the way through, you can eat them. If you find such a giant puffball, you will have a chance to try many variations in the kitchen. Here are two ideas to get you started: breaded and fried and served with tomato sauce, or boiled and then whipped into an herbed mushroom pâté.

avoid the hassle of bringing back poisonous mushrooms). Another possible misidentification is to grab a white

mushroom and assume it is a puffball when really it is a young white mushroom, possibly even a deadly one such as an *Amanita*. This is again easily avoided by slicing the mushroom cleanly through. A puffball has uniform white flesh with no embryonic mushroom form visible. If you slice open a young *amanita*, however, you'll see the beginnings of a regular-looking mushroom. The puffball does not grow up to become a "regular" mushroom with gills, nor is it a polypore. The entire flesh of the puffball turns into spores, and when the mushroom is mature, an animal foot or a big drop of rain will make it puff out smoky clouds of spores. At this stage the puffball is no longer edible, but it is lots of fun to step on and poke, as long as the spore puff is not inhaled. The puffball is mild and its soft texture makes it good for frying up like tofu.

The next few mushrooms I will briefly mention require a little more caution as they are not quite as fool-proof as the hens, chickens, and puffballs. Still, they are common (I find them within city limits), and they are not too difficult to identify. These are the light-bottomed boletes, the meadow and the horse mushrooms (*Agaricus sp.*), and the wine caps (*Stropharia rugosoannulata*). These are all

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mushrooms of the familiar “stem and cap” type, that is, what you would draw if you were told to draw a mushroom. Light-bottomed boletes, the most famous of which is the porcini mushroom (*Boletus edulis*), are a group of mushrooms with packed tubes on the underside of their caps (like hens and chickens) rather than gills. If you find such a mushroom, check if it passes the following two tests: 1) the flesh doesn’t turn a darker color when you bruise or scrape it and 2) a small bite of it is not bitter (bitter ones look a little pinkish too, but this is sometimes hard to notice). If it passes the tests, then it is probably a good edible mushroom. No bolete will kill you, unless of course it is undocumented and has never been found before, and then anything is possible. The mushroom literature is slightly off-putting regarding the edibility of even known species: a large fraction of them are to this day labeled “unknown.” But to dwell on this is to get scared about mushrooming again, so let’s move on. I find edible boletes in the city in grassy areas with large trees. Along with the mushrooms, I usually find a few foragers from Eastern Europe and Russia out there as well.

Agaricus species, specifically the horse and the meadow mushrooms, are the same genus as the most popular mushroom consumed in the U.S.: the button mushroom on the store shelves. With a white cap and brown gills underneath, this mushroom grows on lawns and cut fields. These mushrooms are relatively easy to identify, given our familiarity with the button mushroom, except that the ones we find in the wild may be bigger because by the time we see them they are probably more grown up. Brown gills on the underside are very important though, because white mushrooms with white gills could be one of the deadly kinds. Check with an expert—perhaps someone from your local mycological club.

The last mushroom I want to mention is the wine cap, which is structurally similar to the *Agaricus* but has a different coloring and grows in a different setting. Wine caps have a darkish top, burgundy-colored when young and then becoming light brownish with lilac-colored gills. They grow in mulch, and they usually appear in large numbers, as opposed to the *Agaricus*, which I often find as singletons. The taste of wine caps is not remarkable, and I usually end up throwing them in a soup. However, in

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heavily mulched areas (like an arboretum), they can come up in large numbers and provide a good mushroom harvest.

For mushrooms and for wild plants in general, a bit of advice: be careful and be thorough, but don't be so timid that you forgo all the yummy edibles the natural world has to offer.

-Chapter 12-

**Fall Roots and a Brief Reappearance
of Spring Greens**

Burdock is the granddaddy of bulky, nutritious fall roots. Compared to dealing with acorns, harvesting and preparing burdock root is a walk in the park, even though it still takes a bit of work to get one out of the ground. Only if the ground is very soft and sandy have I ever been able to yank up a burdock root without using a shovel.

Burdock is a common, large weed, with burrs that stick to clothing with great tenacity. This feature makes the plant fairly easy to identify—if you are ambling through a field or along a roadside and find a number of round burrs stuck

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to you, you've brushed by a burdock plant. This is the mechanism of seed dispersal for this plant. Burrs attach to a passing animal and eventually break free far away. In the human's case, they don't fall off, so you are left to disentangle each and every one of them. Even as I type this, I see some in my shoelaces that I have not yet gotten around to removing.

Wild Vegetable Coconut Curry

- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon mustard seeds
- 1 ½ teaspoons fresh grated ginger
- 3 cloves garlic
- 1 large white or yellow onion, thinly sliced
- 1 medium potato, cubed
- 2 carrots, sliced into ¼-inch discs
- 2 green chiles, with the seeds removed
- 2 ½ teaspoons ground coriander
- ¼ teaspoon turmeric
- ¼ teaspoon paprika
- 2 ½ teaspoons ground cumin
- 2 teaspoons salt

3 cups mixed wild vegetables such as thinly sliced burdock root, Japanese knotweed, milkweed shoots or pods (pre-boiled for 10 minutes, drained), pokeweed (boiled for 5 minutes, drained, and then boiled for another 5 minutes and drained again), purslane, wild mushrooms

1 ½ cups coconut milk

Fresh chopped cilantro for garnish

In a splash of oil, fry the mustard seeds for a few minutes until they pop. Add ginger, garlic, onions, potatoes, carrots, chiles, burdock root if using it, and the rest of the oil. Fry for a few minutes, then add all spices and salt. Add all wild vegetables and coconut milk and simmer, covered, for about 10 minutes. Serve with brown basmati rice or quinoa and garnish with cilantro.

In the 1940s, George de Mestral was on a hunting expedition with his dog in the Alps. After some run-ins with burdock, he placed some under a microscope to see how the burrs worked and then spent the next decade figuring out how to mass-produce a synthetic version, which became Velcro.

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It is a good bet that the first several times you harvest burdock root, you will come away with burdock burrs all over your clothes. Even when I try to avoid the burrs, I get so caught up in digging out the root that I get buried. The root of the burdock plant is the best part for eating. You can boil young leaves in spring if you are desperate for food, or enjoy the much tastier peeled leaf petioles (the stems that run up the leaf centers) and main stalk in early summer, but the roots in autumn are the part that I covet. Burdock is a biennial (it has a two-year life cycle), and if the plant is in its first year, which is before it produces its burrs, any time is okay for foraging the root. However, it will be the largest after a summer's worth of fattening, which is why I wait until fall.

As the foraging myth goes, as long as you are willing to keep digging down, the burdock root will keep going. From my experience, this is true; I don't think I've ever unearthed a burdock root in its entirety. But this is okay for several reasons. First and foremost, we are urban foragers, so we have lots going on: dinners, art gallery openings, yoga classes, film screenings. We don't have time to get that whole burdock root. Even when I bring a full-size shovel, I

still do not have the patience to get out much of the root. The roots are as tenacious at staying in the ground as the burrs are at clinging to your clothes. I dig down six inches or so, then get frustrated, break off the root, and take what I get. The other part goes to Ghost Moth larvae, and maybe, given the other strengths of this plant, there is enough left for it to send up a new plant in the spring.

For preparing the burdock root, I use an abrasive side of a sponge to get the dirt off, but I do not peel it. Then, after cleaning, I slice up the root and boil it or pan-fry it with a cover on, to keep it moist. There are lots of recipes on the web for burdock root since it is commonly used in Japanese cooking (it also goes by the name of gobo root) and has gained in popularity with the macrobiotic movement. I occasionally see it for sale at Whole Foods. Pickling burdock root is a good way to store it. To do this, chop cleaned burdock root into bite-size pieces, and boil them in a mixture of half vinegar and half water for about 10 minutes with some salt and spices of your choosing. Then pour the entire mixture into sterilized canning jars. These are hearty enough to stand on their own, and eating them brings back the earthy taste of fall all winter long.

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Burdock root is the last food of the year I go after with full intention. During this time of year I keep a spade in my backpack, but when I set aside time specifically to forage burdock root, I bring a shovel (even if this means strapping it precariously to my bicycle). What often happens though is that I come back with bags full of greens and other things. Late fall sees a resurgence of many “spring” greens, such as dandelions, the greens of daisies, curly dock, and plenty of garlic mustard weed. These plants come back out in the fall, after the trees overhead have lost their leaves, to take advantage of the unobstructed sunlight once again before the freezing weather returns.

In the spring I almost always pass over garlic mustard weed leaves since there are too many other exciting things coming up that taste much better. But a few weeks later in the spring, when the stalk of garlic mustard is about 8 inches tall and the flower buds are present but not open yet, I pick those stalks, strip them of their leaves, and enjoy them on the spot. They are crunchy and potent and I dub them *health sticks* to coax my companions to eat them. But they shouldn't need coaxing: garlic mustard is one of the most nutritious plants there is and the stalks are crunchy

with a complex garlicky flavor, without the long aftertaste of actual garlic.

In the fall, new leaves of garlic mustard emerge. While far inferior to the stems of mid-spring, there is far less to choose from in late fall, so I will occasionally gather a bunch of it for a pesto. The entire plant is edible, including the roots, which can also go into the pesto. Nobody will be mad at you for taking it in its entirety since it is considered an aggressive invasive species. It grows in shady places, by the base of large trees, and it is very common in the woods. Once you learn it you will see it everywhere.

-Chapter 13-

Wintertime

Every resident of Sarajevo is very close to an ideal macrobiotician; ours is a city of slender people, a real role model for the troubled West. The secret to a perfect body is living in a city under siege. When combined with rice and well seasoned, everything becomes edible. In spring, summer, and fall, leaves found in parks, gardens, fields, and hills are used as ingredients. We eat a precious mix of wild imagination.

John Updike, Harper's Magazine, 1993

The benefits of finding and eating wild foods go beyond the added nutrition and the reduced grocery bills. In fact, if I were to add up my time

spent foraging, it would not make economic sense. That's okay though, because *economic* is a terrible word by which to judge the passing of time. On the contrary, how we pass our time is everything, and so spending time well (and helping others do the same) should be the goal itself. Money is certainly a way to potentially help achieve this goal (more money could lead to more leisure time), but I mostly observe a compulsion for acquiring money not to that end, but seemingly for the sake of having money itself.

Physical exercise and a heightened awareness of the natural world are two huge benefits that come from foraging. John Adams was a vocal advocate of the daily walk. He would stroll for a couple of miles every day, except when he got sick, and then he would try to make it closer to five miles. All of the sitting we do runs counter to what our bodies have evolved for. We have evolved to be good tree climbers and runners and walkers, and foraging can tap into each of these, although hopefully there is no *need* to run. Most modern humans are far away from using these physical capabilities, or even desiring to—notice how people stop all physical exertion the moment they set foot on an escalator.

For me, every time I open a newspaper and read about the latest world disasters, political mischief, and money- or power-grabbing schemes, I do not feel better. I feel worse and disappointed to be living in a world where 1) those types of things happen all the time and 2) people seem to be more interested in reading about these events than anything else, even though there is no indication that things were ever different or will ever be different. In my view, a walk outside, with plenty of stops to smell (and eat!) the roses and pauses to have a look at all the other plants, is a much better way to pass the time. Perhaps Henry David Thoreau said it best:

I plod along, thinking what a miserable world this is and what miserable fellows we that inhabit it, wondering what it is tempts men to live in it; but anon I leave the towns behind and am lost in some boundless heath, and life becomes gradually more tolerable, if not even glorious.

Urban foraging is a way to make life more tolerable without having to leave the towns.

Even the most sophisticated inventions (computers, airplanes, gene sequencers) pale in comparison to the complexity of any plant. We haven't yet succeeded in

technologically creating life, because it is still too difficult. Even if we do, it will be something much simpler than a plant. Attention to plants, and to life in general, sets off a stream of pure wonder and amazement that front page headlines never produce in me.

Maple Sugaring

As the winter winds down and days above freezing start to come regularly, you can jump-start the foraging season by tapping some city maple trees. Stake out a couple of maple trees when they still have their leaves. Any maple will do, but a large old sugar maple will be the best. Most urban maple trees are specimens of the Norway maple, loved by city planners but hated by environmentalists because of its invasive properties. These maples won't yield a sap with as high a sugar content as other kinds of maples, but they will still provide you with your own homemade maple syrup.

Making maple syrup requires two steps: collecting the sap from the trees and boiling it to eliminate most of the water. Collecting the sap requires a drill, some cleaned

one-gallon plastic milk containers, and some maple taps (called spiles). A spile is nothing more than a metal or wooden spigot, which is simply a cylinder with a hole bored out of it. You can purchase these online and reuse them from year to year. I bought the smallest ones in the smallest quantity I could get, and they have worked out fine. You could also bore out your own from a branch of wood or a dowel. Make sure to taper it slightly to snugly fit into the hole you will drill in the tree. In each milk container, cut a small hole into the upper part opposite the handle. The taps I purchased have a small lip on them, which makes it possible to hang the milk containers from them without needing to secure the buckets with string.

Drill a small horizontal hole at about waist level about an inch into the tree. The hole should be slightly smaller than the tap. Gently set in the tap with a hammer. If the weather conditions are right, within seconds you may even start to see the sap dripping out. Put your bucket on and check back in eight hours or so to see how you are doing. When sap is flowing well, which happens for a few weeks, the buckets can fill up once a day. The sap looks like water, but it is slightly sweet to the taste.

Back in the kitchen, open your windows and turn your stove vent on if you have one, and start boiling down the sap. Without proper ventilation, your stove area is bound to get a little sticky from the evaporation process. Your sap should be boiled down until it is thick and a bubbly froth emerges, but there is no magic time to stop. In fact, you could stop when it is still quite watery, particularly if you plan to use it in oatmeal or some other porridge. But if you are thinking about pancakes and such, you will end up boiling down to a ratio of about 30 to 1. After boiling, pour the syrup into sterilized mason jars and seal your vegan sweet source for later enjoyment.

A word on tree selection: depending on where you live, it may be against city rules to tap public maple trees. It might be possible to get permission by assuring the town that maple tapping does not harm the trees. Like most organisms in nature, trees are well-equipped to handle minor damage. I don't bother asking because I think the idea of obtaining local foods at no harm to anyone should be encouraged and should not be something that one has to petition for. If we get to a point

where too many people are tapping the urban maple trees, we've made some real “progress”—which of course in this context means reverting to what the Native Americans were doing for thousands of years—and then maybe it would be time for some legislation on restricting maple tapping.



Maple sugaring with simple equipment: two plastic gallon buckets, two metal taps, and a maple tree in a town park. The sap looks like water but tastes slightly sweet, and then boils down to maple syrup.

Aside from the scientific and cultural arguments for paying more attention to the natural world, there is also a more instinctual benefit. It is interesting that the word *dirty* has taken on a solidly negative connotation, given that dirt

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is of central importance for all of the land-based foods we eat. Cultures whose connection to the land is an obvious part of daily life, such as Native American cultures, praise the land when it gives them food. I cannot make any claims about why digging in the dirt and harvesting your own food is so inwardly satisfying, but I believe it is related to the fact that this is what most humans have done for all but the last thousand years or so. For me, collecting the plants and eating them is already enough, and I do not feel the need to use primitive skills to preserve and prepare all the foods I find. If a food processor or freezer can be helpful, I use it with no qualms, and I think it is important to keep a balanced attitude on things like this. Our society places great emphasis on people who make up their mind and stick to it, and this means that being something like a 90% vegetarian, or an agnostic, is frowned upon. Someone who forages food but also buys coffee from Africa, olive oil from Italy, and wine from Chile—and uses a microwave to cook his watercress—may be considered hypocritical. However, it is more self-sustaining to be conscious of the continual choices we make (the food we eat, where our

clothes come from, how we treat others), and to be balanced about our decisions.

For those of us in colder climates, foraging for the year tapers off when the frosts come and the ground freezes.[§] In a way, this is somewhat of a relief to me, as I sometimes go a little overboard during foraging season and I need a break. It is calming to walk the same walks in winter and not be constantly on the lookout for something edible.

Still, foraging is never far removed from my life during the winter. For morning oatmeal, there are frozen juneberries, blackberries, and black locust flowers, as well as jarred apple butter. There are dried apples for afternoon snacks and pickled mushrooms and burdock root for dinner. Japanese knotweed is tucked away in bags in the freezer and adds a spring tang to winter soups, perhaps served with warm acorn bread. And in the evening, over a foraging

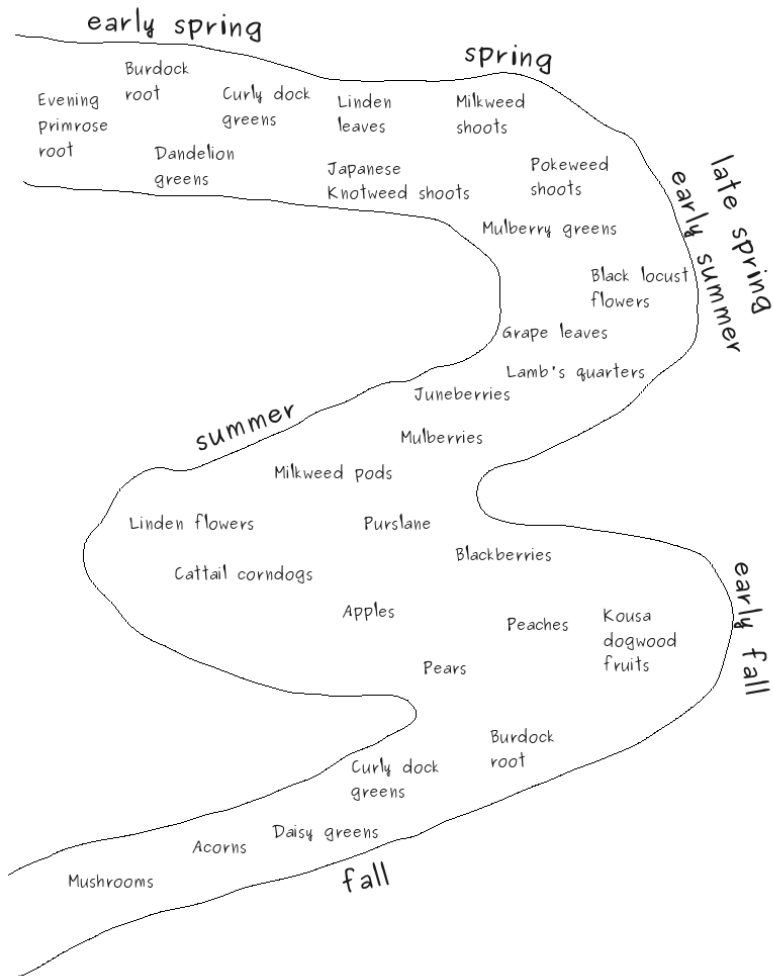
§ Upon initially hearing the phrase *urban foraging*, many assume this to be another name for *dumpster diving*. Dumpster diving is a type of modern-day foraging. It adds considerably to the urban foraging arsenal while at the same time turning foraging into a year-round activity. For the skeptics, I suggest taking a peek at *Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal*, by Tristram Stuart.

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book to get me stirred up for next year's finds, a cup of linden tea, and maybe a nip of hawthorn schnapps, are fitting companions.

If your foraging career starts in winter with some book such as this one, spend lots of time staring at the pictures of the plants and read about where they like to grow. It may be hard to believe, but these plants will pop up exactly where and when they are supposed to. Get them in your mind, and soon enough, when the first spring thaws warm up the land, they will sprout up and grace your plate and your soul for many years to come.

Top Urban Edibles Seasonal Road Map



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