

FREE-RANGE SHOPPING:

FORAGING FOR WILD EDIBLES IN THE NORTH COUNTRY

By Holly Riddle

For many long-time foragers, the practice of harvesting wild edibles from the land is one passed down through generations. It's not necessarily a hobby, but a simple part of life — taking from the land's bounty as one's family always has, using natural ingredients for their culinary and medicinal uses.

However, not everyone's so fortunate as to have this generational wisdom at their fingertips. Luckily, those who do are more than willing to pass along their knowledge to the growing number of newcomers to the world of wild edibles.

Patricia "Pat" Banker is an instructor with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Franklin County, leads wild edible walks at the Paul Smith's College VIC and runs the Adirondack Foragers & Foragers of the North East Facebook group. Banker says she noticed an increased public interest in foraging — what she calls free-range shopping — forming as far back as 20-plus years ago. However, education about foraging safety and sustainability wasn't always readily available at that time.

Today, that's less of an issue, in part thanks to initiatives like the 4-H-based wild edibles curriculum developed between Cornell Cooperative Extension of Warren County and Cornell Cooperative Extension of Franklin County, as well as the extensive number of guidebooks and online resources readily available. That said, many still agree that the best way to learn to safely and sustainably forage is through hands-on practice with an experienced expert.

It's something that Marita Orr, herbalist and owner of The Seabiscuit Inn and Herbary in Wells, New York, stresses, as part of her herbal foraging workshops offered throughout the summer.



"That's the only way to really learn," she said. "You have to have a trained person ... because you have to know what you're eating. It's so easy to hurt yourself... Go out with a skilled person."

Over the years, Banker said, the reasons why more people have been drawn to foraging and wild edibles have evolved. Years ago, she described, when asking wild edible walk attendees at the Paul Smith's VIC why they were there, answers often mentioned simple curiosity or interest in foraging as a fun hobby. Over time, though, reasoning has drifted more so into sustainability, utilizing items right in one's own backyard and the nutrition benefits of wild edibles.

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At Cornell Cooperative Extension of Warren County, Executive Director John Bowe likewise mentioned, in relation to the 4-H program's wild edible education and increasing interest, "I think people in general are more interested in knowing exactly where their food is coming from and having a certain amount of control over where their food is coming from — so sometimes the interest is actually from a parent, not necessarily from the kids."

POPULAR NORTH COUNTRY WILD EDIBLES (AND HOW TO HARVEST THEM SUSTAINABLY)

While what one can harvest throughout the North Country changes with the seasons, there are a few wild edibles that are generally simple to find.

In the spring, Banker said, stinging nettle is easy to identify, but she cautioned that there are some tricks to harvesting, cleaning and prepping it.

"It's not hard," she said. "It's really only wearing gloves and handling [it] with tongs while you're washing it ... but it's absolutely delicious. It's better for you than spinach and has a nicer, milder taste."

Then, she continued, dandelions, violets and ramps are also fairly beginner friendly — with the caveat that sustainability must be kept in mind when foraging for ramps, also commonly known as wild leeks or, *Allium tricoccum*. Studies have found that, in the Adirondacks, there are patches of wild leeks that have been so overly harvested that they may require as much as 75 years to recoup.

"They have a five to seven-year growth [period] that they need to go through in order to produce seed," said Banker. "So there's a right way and a wrong way to harvest them."

For example, she mentioned, for those who want to harvest the bulbs, cutting the base of the bulb, where the rootlets are located, while harvesting, and returning it to the ground, can ensure that the bulbs continue growing. Likewise, when harvesting the plant's leaves, leaving behind a leaf (mature plants will have three), ensures the plant will still have enough greenery to produce the chlorophyll and nutrients necessary to survive.

Banker recommends blending the leaves with salt and olive oil and double bagging them for freezer storage, using the mixture as needed throughout the season. "The flavor is distinctly wild ramp," she described. "It's garlic with a kick, a garlic with heat, whereas the bulbs taste like scallions."



Orr likewise mentioned ramps, dandelion and violets, as well as sumac and knotweed.

"The sumac, the big berries on top make lovely lemonade and the berries are high [in] vitamin C," she said. For knotweed, she continued, "the top part, the little sprouts that come out, get them [at] about two to three inches tall. The smaller they are, the more tender they are. Cut the little shafts that come up and use them fermented or like rhubarb. It has that same texture and is very tangy... Sometimes [you can] cut them up and put them in salads, but they can get tough once they get to be a little bit over that two or three inches — but it's like a little delicacy. A lot of times you see them used like capers."

In general, when foraging, many like to follow the one-third rule. If you come across a wild edible you're interested in harvesting, take a third for yourself, leave a third for the environment and leave a third for the future. Orr takes this concept a bit further, opting to only take about 5% of a patch of edibles, and says it's important to additionally be careful as to where within the growth you harvest your haul.

"Some things, like cattails, they need to be harvested from the center," she explained, "so when you're taking their roots from the front, you're hurting the plant for the next year... Again, [it's] really good to go out with someone who knows plants, so you can harvest sustainably. A lot of people will just go in and pull from the edges and kill the whole thing."

IMPORTANT SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

Beyond just proper identification, other safety precautions must also be kept in mind.

"Don't harvest anything 50 to 75 feet, at least, at minimum, from any busy roadway. Don't harvest from ... farm fields, if it's a perennial plant that comes up every year, because it will retain pesticides," advised Banker. "Don't harvest in ditches, don't harvest

in polluted waterways and don't harvest from your neighbor's lawn, if you don't know for certain that there's nothing on it."

Additionally, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation places certain guidelines around what plants can be harvested, and in what quantities, from state lands.

Bowe similarly cautioned: "If you don't know what's being sprayed on an area, or if anything is being sprayed on an area, you don't harvest there... Avoid areas like power lines or the edges of agricultural fields... And do you have permission to be on that property? Can you harvest those things legally? ... Trespassing is one of the things you want to avoid, and if you're going out to state land, what kind of harvesting is allowed? You always want to check in with the management agency, whatever that agency is, and find out [if you're] allowed to harvest."

He also made an important note of potential allergic reactions. "If you're going out and, let's say you find wild leeks, for example, take a piece of that leaf... Gently rub that on the inside of your wrist and wait some time. Make sure you don't react to it. Just like everything out there, some people are allergic to bees, some people are allergic to certain kinds of plants. People need to be careful about this."

"Get two really good identification books, like [A Peterson Field Guide to Edible Wild Plants] ... and find a friend who's ... been doing this forever," added Banker. "There are good classes out there. You can call your local [Cornell Cooperative Extension] and they may direct you to who in the area's doing it."

Keep in mind, meanwhile, that foraging sites and social media, as well as apps, can be incorrect.

"Again, the best way to learn is the way we've learned how to do this from when we started walking upright on this planet. It's to learn from someone with the knowledge," concluded Banker. 🌱

WILD EDIBLE RECIPES FROM MARITA ORR

Dandelion Honey Butter (Servings: 8)

INGREDIENTS

- **1/4 cup** dandelion blossoms measured after being removed from stem
- **1/2 cup** butter salted or unsalted (unsalted works best)
- **1/4 cup** honey

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Allow** butter to come to room temperature to soften.
2. **Combine** butter and honey, and whip vigorously with a fork.
3. **Stir** in dandelion petals.
4. **Store** in a covered jar, in the fridge for up to 3 months.

Strawberry Japanese Knotweed Crisp

INGREDIENTS

Fruit Filling:

- **4 cups** Japanese knotweed stalks (young shoots harvested in spring, washed, leaves removed and chopped into 1/2-inch pieces)
- **2 cups** strawberries, hulled and quartered
- **2/3 cup** granulated sugar (adjust to taste, as knotweed is quite tart)
- **1 tbsp** fresh lemon juice

- **3 tbsp** flour or cornstarch (to thicken the juices)

Crisp Topping:

- **1 cup** all-purpose flour
- **2/3 cup** rolled oats
- **1/3 cup** brown sugar, packed
- **1/4 tsp** salt
- **1 tsp** ground cinnamon
- **1/3 cup** cold unsalted butter, melted

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Prep the oven and pan:** Preheat your oven to 350°F. Lightly butter a 9x9-inch baking dish.
2. **Make the filling:** In a large mixing bowl, gently toss the chopped knotweed, strawberries, sugar, lemon juice and flour (or cornstarch) until the fruit is evenly coated. Pour the mixture into your prepared baking dish and spread it out evenly.
3. **Mix the topping:** In a separate bowl, whisk together the flour, oats, brown sugar, salt and cinnamon. Add the melted butter until mixed.
4. **Assemble and bake:** Sprinkle the oat crumble topping evenly over the strawberry-knotweed mixture. Bake in the preheated oven for about 40 to 45 minutes, or until the top is golden brown and the fruit is bubbling underneath.
5. **Serve:** Let the crisp cool for about 10–15 minutes to allow the juices to thicken slightly. Serve warm, ideally with a large scoop of vanilla ice cream or a dollop of whipped cream.