

Delicious, wild ingredients are quite literally on your doorstep. Foraging expert **Rachel De Thample** explains how to find them

Strolling along the West Dorset coastline, I was keeping a sharp eye on the hedgerows for the first lacy blooms of elderflower. Late spring is one of the most glorious moments in the foraging calendar. The year starts with a flush of lush wild greens: wild garlic, nettles, ground elder and jack-by-the-hedge. Green then transforms to fragrant white blossoms, then, as the sun shines brighter, it's warmth ripens these flowers into delicious fruits and nuts.

I always carry a bag to bundle any foraged finds and, as I plucked a few bouquets of sun-kissed elderflower, I spied a few clusters of over-ripe elderberries dripping from a branch sheltered in a shady nook. It was the perfect picture of seasonal quirks and a beautiful illustration of why I love to forage: it makes you notice nature. Foraging lets you leave the challenges of modern life behind, and connects you back to nature. It's mindfulness at its best.

It's no surprise, then, that in the last decade, foraging has made a comeback. While there are no official figures available, the number of foraging experts and courses available across the country is testament to the fact that wild food is on trend. With celebrity chefs and famous foodies promoting the virtues of locally sourced, wild ingredients, it's a trend that's unlikely to go away.



The results of a spring forage – 'The year starts with a flush of lush wild greens'



Wild rose, lime flower and lemon balm foraged tea

Beyond the call to nature, foraging also opens the door to so many new and exotic flavours. Alexander seeds taste like frankincense, black pepper and nutmeg all bundled into one. They are beautiful rubbed into beef with fresh bay leaves, or used to fragrance an apple chutney. Sea buckthorn is like a cross between passion fruit and rosehips with a salty edge, as it's often found along coastal paths. It makes a phenomenal sorbet.

You can forage year-round, but it's spring that brings the greatest bounty; it's also a great time for beginners to get started, as the lush growth of summer is yet to begin and there are plenty of easily identifiable plants around. Stinging nettles, with their jagged, heart-shaped leaves, can be sautéed in butter or wilted and stirred through curries. They also make wonderfully nutritious soups and teas. Put on gardening gloves and pick the top four to six leaves. In early summer, look out for elder growing in woods and hedgerows. Pick the flowers and use them to make cordial, fritters, wine, and elderflower and strawberry jam.

You can forage anywhere and everywhere – just bear in mind that while foraging in public spaces and footpaths is perfectly legal, you must ask the permission of the



'Foraging makes you notice nature,' says Rachel, above

owner on private land. I gather wild food pretty much every day; the streets leading from my house to my son's school are lined with cherry trees and elder. My local park nurtures a bounty of wild greens like jack-by-the-hedge, mallow, wild rocket, ground elder, fat hen, yarrow and ribwort plantain. Coastal Britain abounds with edible delights. I often make special trips to Whitstable in early autumn to stroll along the coast in search of wild fennel and alexander seeds. In late spring, I love to gather flowering sea kale, sea beet and, of course, various shades of seaweed. You often find wild nasturtiums growing through cliff-side rocks, too.

Back inland, tucked in the shade of the woods, is a surprising feast. Look up and you'll see hazelnuts, walnuts and chestnuts hidden in the canopies. Growing beneath trees and up the trunks are mushrooms, nettles and wild garlic. Stroll along a disused railway line and you'll be bowled over with the bounty of orchard fruits you'll find. In Dorset, there's an old ➤



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A beginner's guide to FORAGING

railway path that runs from West Bay to Bridport and you can fill a sack with damsons, apples, blackberries, golden Mirabelle plums and rosehips.

One of the best ways to get started is to go on a guided foraging walk. Head to foragers-association.org.uk for more information on local guides, or just google foraging walks in your area. When you're a beginner, it's a good idea to have an expert on hand to help you master plant identification (see over the page for our top five plants to forage this spring). Once you're feeling confident, you'll be surprised how many wild things you have growing (quite literally) in your own backyard. Last summer in a friend's garden, we found salad burnet (a beautiful leaf with a cucumber-like flavour), ribwort plantain (which has little seeds that taste



Rachel leads a foraging group in Hackney, London

'Stepping out into the fresh air to *gather something for dinner* is one of the most natural, *invigorating*, delicious and *nutritious* things we can do'

like cobnuts), wild strawberries, pink elderflower and wild oregano.

Beyond familiar ground, care needs to be taken when gathering wild food. It's vital not to pick too much. My rule is never to gather more than a quarter of what's available. The idea is not only to leave enough for others to enjoy – wildlife included – but also to ensure that the plant is able to reproduce. It's also important to ensure the ground you're gathering from is not contaminated or hasn't been sprayed with chemicals like herbicides. Some local parks spray along the paths to keep the weeds back so this is something to consider; the best way to navigate this is to build a good relationship with the park's 'Friends Of group, and the local council.

Given the perfect storm of ecological and social crises we face, humanity needs to – urgently and radically – examine its relationship to food. Stepping into the fresh air to gather something for dinner is one of the most natural, invigorating,

delicious and nutritious things we can do. And once you know what to look for, you'll find that wild food is growing all around you. Rachel De Thample teaches wild food cookery at Made In Hackney, and runs preserving courses at River Cottage. racheldethample.com ➤

FORAGING KIT

- A kitchen knife
- Scissors
- Waterproof clothing
- Bags to haul your foraged finds home
- Gardening gloves
- A small trowel or spoon for digging
- A mini first-aid kit
- Identification guide
- Clean, empty yogurt containers for storing berries to avoid damage



Garden-foraged lemon verbena and calendula detox tea



Japanese hotpot with foraged wild greens



◀ Elderflower

Elder is a shrub with long stems that have cracked, greeny-grey bark and small creamy-white flowers. It grows in early summer in woods, hedgerows and on waste ground. Only pick the flowers (or later, the berries) – the rest is toxic. The flowers taste honeyed and floral.

HOW TO USE IT Make elderflower cordial, strawberry and elderflower jam, or fry in batter for a delicious fritter.



◀ Dandelion

With bright yellow flowers, hollow stems and leaves that spread from the base of the plant, it grows vigorously in town and countryside.

Tastes earthy, nutty and mildly bitter.

HOW TO USE IT Add the leaves to salads, or stir into pasta and stews.

▼ Stinging nettles

Grows on waste ground and in parks, woodland and hedgerows. The jagged, heart-shaped leaves have stinging hairs on them and taste like spinach. Pick from the top for the best flavour.

HOW TO USE IT Wilt nettles in boiling water, or sauté in olive oil or butter, or stir through stews and curries. Make nettle tea by simmering in water with a tablespoon of honey for 15 minutes.

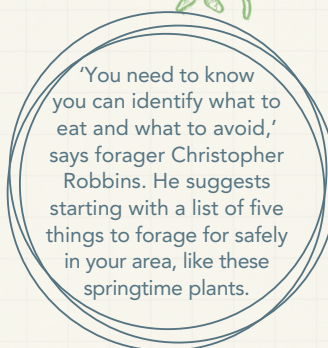
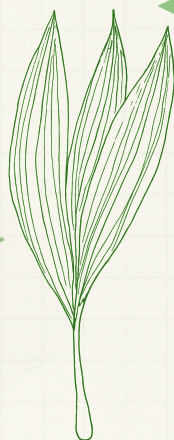


What to pick now

◀ Wild garlic

Look for small, star-shaped white flowers on a single stem with long, pointed leaves, growing along the banks of streams and rivers. The real test is the scent: break a leaf and you will smell a spring-onion-like aroma. Tastes like garlic, but not quite as hot.

HOW TO USE IT You use the leaves rather than the bulbs. They add flavour to pasta dishes, bubble and squeak or soups, or use to make a tasty



▲ Samphire

Found in abundance in the tidal mud flats and salt marshes along the UK coast, from June onwards. Samphire looks like a spineless mini cactus, with soft, fleshy leaves, and tastes crisp and salty.

HOW TO USE IT Snip off the top with scissors, so the stem stays intact. Wash thoroughly then boil for a few minutes. Serve with butter and lemon juice.



FIND OUT MORE...

WATCH

Wild Food UK runs foraging courses all over the country and also makes short, snappy videos to help explain the dos and don'ts of collecting your own food. Search for Wild Food UK on YouTube.

GO ONLINE

Eatweeds.co.uk is a great website full of recipes, videos and articles to keep you up to date with the foraging world. To find a month-by-month account of what to forage, visit woodlandtrust.org.uk.

WATCH

Tama Matsuoka Wong took up farming and opened up a whole new world of cooking by eating the weeds that were covering her land. Watch her TED talk *How I Did Less And Ate Better, Thanks To Weeds* on YouTube ([youtube.com/watch?v=o8xWaNp_lbl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8xWaNp_lbl)).

READ

Wild Food by Roger Phillips (Macmillan, £20) will help you identify edible wild foods; Richard Mabey's *Food For Free* (Collins, £30) is an extensive guide; and if you live in a city, *The Edible City: A Year Of Wild Food* (Boxtree, £12.99) by John Rensten is an urban guide to foraging.

DOWNLOAD

Forage – Free Food From The Wild, £1.99 from the App Store for iOS, is a great app with plenty of information. Find plant identifications, images and warnings. It also has a GPS function so you can mark where you found certain plants. ■

