

## Edible berries

**Saskatoon berry** These sweet fruits can be eaten fresh, dried like raisins or mashed and dried. Saskatoon berries can be used in baking, preserves, sauces and wines. They are hardy and easily propagated, with beautiful, white blossoms in spring, delicious fruit in summer, and colorful, often scarlet leaves in autumn.

**Thimbleberry** Thimbleberries can be tasteless, tart or sweet depending on the season and habitat. They do not dry, keep or travel well, so are usually eaten fresh, right on the trail, rather than stored for winter.

**Raspberry** This colorful, delicious fruit is popular fresh from the branch or added to pies, cakes, puddings, cobblers, preserves, juices, wines and flavored vinegars. Tender, young shoots peeled of their bristly outer layer, are edible raw or cooked. Fresh or dried leaves make a pleasant, healthful tea and the flowers can make a pretty addition to salads.

**Rosehips** Most parts of wild rose shrubs are edible. The hips remain on the branches throughout winter, so they are available when most other fruits are gone. Hips can be used fresh or dried or used in tea, jam, jelly, syrup and wine. The dry inner seeds are not palatable and can irritate the digestive tract. All members of the Rose family have cyanide-like compounds in their seeds which are destroyed by drying or cooking. Rose petals may be eaten as a trail nibble, added to salads, teas, jellies and wines or be dried. Rose leaves, roots and peeled twigs have also been used in teas. Buds, young shoots and young leaves may be eaten raw or cooked. Rosehips are rich in vitamins A, B, C, E and K.

**Huckleberry** Considered by some to be the most delicious and highly prized berry in the Rockies. Huckleberries can be used like domestic blueberries – eaten fresh from the bush, added to fruit salads, baking and preserves, or crushed and used in cold drinks. Huckleberries are often found in large quantities in open, subalpine sites (such as old burns).

**Elderberry (black)** The black berries are sweet and juicy when mature and make excellent pies, jellies and very good wine. Some people experience a little nausea if they eat too many berries raw, but cooking renders them safe for all. The crushed leaves are known as a fairly effective insect repellent. **Warning:** There is a blue elderberry which is edible, but the related red elderberry is said to be poisonous, so use caution when identifying the elderberry species for food.

**Soapberry**, also called **Buffaloberry** or **Soopalallie** Fruits of this common shrub are translucent scarlet or orange-yellow, juicy and bitter. The berry pulp contains saponin, which makes it soapy to the touch. The berries, when mixed with a little water and sugar and beaten, froth up into a salmon-coloured mass rich in iron. A favorite traditional treat amongst all Interior native groups, this preparation is popularly known as “Indian Ice Cream.”

*Ask the sacred plants what you will be leaving for the next generations if you harvest them. You will feel the answer in your heart.*

### **“To touch is to know”**

Much of what you observe about a plant can be learned by touching it. Close your eyes and observe what comes through: you may see hairs on a plant, but when you touch them you can tell more about their structure. The hairs may be soft or scratchy, or move in a wavelike fashion imitating the cilia that line your lungs. Perhaps this hairiness brings stimulation or cleansing. Maybe there is a sting or a prick that could be a protective quality or one that will bring you to instant attention. When you touch it, you may find the plant dry, so perhaps it can act as an astringent. On the other hand the plant may feel juicy, thus promoting fluid production or lubricating joints or may be slimy with mucilage, which soothes mucous membranes. As you rub the plant across your face and down your neck, the surface may soothe you or perhaps move you to sing. You may be urged to touch certain parts of your body with the plant and leave it there for a certain period of time to directly receive its resonance.

As you build relationships with plants it’s important to touch them often. Like humans, plants respond to being touched in a gentle, caring way.

## Resources

- [Edible & Medicinal Plants of the Rocky Mountains](#) by Terry Willard
- [Plants of Southern Interior British Columbia and the Inland Northwest](#) by Parish et al
- [Trees, Shrubs & Flowers to know in British Columbia](#) by C.P. Lyons



**Fernie Community Eco Garden  
Workshop Series 2008 - Keeping Food Real**

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# Foraging for Food

With growing populations and dwindling areas of natural vegetation, the use of wild resources must be viewed as a privilege, rather than a right. Many populations of wild edible and medicinal plants have disappeared as a result of uncontrolled harvesting, especially in densely populated areas. However, many common plants, in the wild and in fields or in roadsides closer to home, can be gathered without threatening natural ecosystems. Gathering wild plants simply requires common sense and respect for the environment. There isn’t enough space on this sheet to include plant identifications, so be sure to have a good field guide for plants in the area you’ll be exploring.

## A Few Gathering Tips

**Gather only common plants**, and never take more than five percent of the population (i.e. one plant in 20, one berry in 20). Even then, a cautious personal quota will still deplete the plants if too many people gather them in one area. Remember, plants growing in harsh mountain environments might not have enough energy to produce flowers and fruits every year. Also, remember local wildlife. Survival of many animals depends on access to the roots, shoots, and fruits that you are harvesting.

**Know which part of the plant you need.** It isn’t always necessary to take a whole plant to use it. Don’t pull up an entire plant if you plan only to use the flowers or the younger leaves. Take only what you need and damage the plant as little as possible. If you are gathering bulbs or rootstocks, leave smaller pieces buried in the ground to produce new plants. If you want to grow a plant in your garden, try propagating it from seed rather than transplanting it from the wild.

**Gather plants only when you are certain of their identity.** Many irritating and poisonous plants grow wild in the Rockies, and some of them resemble edible or medicinal species. Gather plants carefully, taking care not to mix in the leaves or rootstocks of nearby plants which could be poisonous.

“Eating something poisonous” is often the biggest worry of novices when they begin searching for wild edible plants. There are not many deadly plants in our area, but there are a few. This is enough reason to be very cautious. A number of plants in the West will make you quite ill if you eat them, especially in large quantities.

Eating wild plants may strike some people as a risky business at best. Pause for a moment, though, and consider the fact that all of our cultivated plants were originally wild. A myriad of changes and advances separate the “cultivar” from its wild relative: food yields have been increased, tastes improved and textures enhanced. But compare the taste of wild strawberries to domestic varieties. The cultivated berries are large, appealing to the eye, and designed to “ship better”, but what they have gained in these respects they’ve often lost in flavour.

Wild plants have an added benefit. They are closely adapted to the place where they live. They are adapted to the same sunny summers and cold winters which we humans experience. Adding these local plants to your diet can be very beneficial to your health, as they are largely free from the dangerous chemicals used in growing commercial plants. Our ancestors and the indigenous people of this fine land used their diet as a very practical part of everyday medicine. As an example, if your stomach was a “little off”, more bitter foods (herbs) were added to the diet for a while.

Local wild plants can be freshly picked, often only minutes before eating. The deterioration rate of green leafy vegetables is very rapid. When vegetables are obtained from the local market they have already lost a sizeable proportion of vitamins and food value. Some plants lose as much as one third of their food value in the first hour after picking.

We are using sound economic sense when we don’t overlook this part of the ecological food chain. Not only are these plants enjoyable and healthy to eat, we also avoid wasting our natural resources.

Beyond the economics, there is great adventure and sport in trying to forage one’s own wild food and to create a delicious meal. Eating wild plants is fun, healthy, economical and the result is delicious. For perhaps a few minutes we can get a real sense of where we fit in the world around us.

*The best rule is:  
if you don’t know  
what the plant is,  
and whether or not it  
is edible, don’t eat it.*

*Get a good field guide  
for plants in your area  
and be sure to take it  
with you when you set  
out to explore the wild.*

**Stinging Nettle** This is one of our most delicious wild greens. Gather using gloves, scissors and a bucket to avoid being stung. In the spring, before the plant flowers, cut off the top 4-6 leaves and steam as you would spinach. Save the cooking water for a nutritious and refreshing drink. Nettles are high in Vitamins A, C and minerals. The stinging effect of the fresh plant is no longer present after cooking or drying. Can be dried for a beverage tea or hair rinse, and for adding to winter soups.

**Dandelion** All parts of the dandelion are edible. Young leaves can be used in salads (fresh or cooked and chilled) or served hot as a cooked vegetable – scalloped, baked or added to meat dishes and soups. They can also be mixed in a blender with tomato juice, worcestershire and tabasco sauces to make a vitamin-rich cold drink (sounds like a virgin caesar!). Older leaves or leaves growing in sunny areas are especially bitter. Bitterness can be reduced by removing the leaf midveins, and by boiling the plants in at least two changes of water. Look for tender leaves growing under mulch in spring, when they are almost white. The roots, dug in spring or autumn, peeled, sliced and cooked in two changes of water with a pinch of baking soda, have been used as a cooked vegetable, similar to parsnips. Dandelion roots can also be used raw in salads or can be dried, roasted slowly until dark brown throughout, and ground to make a coffee substitute (often combined with chicory). The flower petals produce a highly esteemed, delicately flavoured, pale yellow wine. They also make a pretty addition to pancakes. Unopened buds can be used raw in salads, cooked in pancakes and fritters or pickled. The chewy seeds(without their fluffy parachutes) have been eaten as nibble, ground into a flour or used to grow sprouts.

Dandelions are rich in vitamins A, C, E and B-complex, iron, calcium and potassium. Dandelion root or leaf tea was used as a mild laxative, and to also stimulate urination, salivation, and secretion of gastric juices and bile, improve appetite and generally tone the whole system. **Warning:** Never collect dandelions that might have been sprayed with herbicides!

**Oxeye Daisy** The un-opened buds can be marinated and used in a similar way to capers. The stem leaves are quite tasty and are added to fancy salads in gourmet restaurants. The basal leaves are very sweet in the spring. Medicinally, daisies have been used to treat blood in the urine, piles and stomach ulcers.

**Thistle** The delicious tap roots can be eaten raw but preferably roasted for several hours or boiled. Cooked roots can be sliced and then fried or mashed, dried and then ground into flour. Because they contain a relatively indigestible sugar, inulin, raw thistle roots often cause gas. Some roots turn sugary when roasted. The stems and leaves are often sweet and juicy, but before they can be eaten, they have to be peeled to remove their prickles by holding the plant upside down and peeling from the bottom to the top with a sharp knife. Peeled parts can be eaten raw or cooked as a vegetable. The immature flowerheads can be eaten raw or steamed and served with lemon butter. Some say they are better than their well known relative artichoke. Because these nutritious plants are so widespread and easily identified, they are an excellent survival food. Thistle is a plant source of water often called survival celery. Remove prickles as stated and ingest the clear sap from the stalks and mid ribs on the leaves. Chew up the pulp and spit out the fibres as it takes water to digest them.

**Chicory** Leaves can be eaten raw in salads, but become very bitter with age and with exposure to sunlight. Green leaves usually require at least one change of water during cooking. Young, white, underground parts of young plants grown in darkness are best. Young plants make an excellent cooked vegetable. Belgian endive and radicchio are related to chicory. Chicory roots can be eaten raw, boiled or roasted. They are said to have a carrot-like flavour when young. More often however they are split, dried, roasted until brown throughout and ground to make a coffee substitute. Use about 1/8 teaspoon per cup; if it is mixed with coffee, use 2 parts coffee to 1 part chicory and reduce the total ground by one-third. The roots are best collected before or well after the plants have flowered. The pretty blue flowerheads have been added to salads, pickled or cooked in soups and stews. Chicory is grown commercially as a source of fructose and maltol (a sugar enhancer).

Chicory is rich in vitamins A and C. Chicory root tea/coffee is reputed to improve the appetite and stimulate bile secretion and urination. Historically, chicory-root was used to treat liver problems, gout, skin infections, rheumatism, fevers, inflammation, nausea, lung problems, typhoid and cancer. **Warning:** People with gall stones should consult a doctor before using chicory!

**Burdock** Root is medicinal and can be a delicious vegetable when grown in the garden. Our wild burdock is related to the traditional Japanese vegetable, gobo.

**Chickweed** A delicate plant, delicious raw in salads, collected before flower buds appear and stems become fibrous. Can be steamed, but unless one finds a good patch of larger-leaved plants, collecting a quantity for cooking can be very tedious. Modern herbalists prescribe chickweed for skin diseases, bronchitis, rheumatic pains, arthritis and period pain. A poultice of chickweed can be applied to cuts, burns and bruises. Chickweed has an amazing effect in soothing itchy skin. Make a strong tea and wash the area.

**Lambs Quarters** This is one of many similar “goosefoot” species, having nothing to do with lambs, were originally named after Lammas, the pagan summer harvest festival. When collected before buds appear, lambs quarters are good eaten in salads or lightly steamed. The herb contains large amounts of beta-carotene and vitamin C. Seeds can be ground and added to bread dough. The flour resembles buckwheat and is considered equally nutritious. Seeds are also good eaten raw. With 70,000 seeds per plant collecting them for food is a good idea rather than allowing them to spread in your garden! **Warning:** This plant contains high levels of oxalic acid, so large quantities should not be eaten

**Strawberry Blite** Another plant from the goosefoot family, this succulent, annual herb has bright red flowers which form a spherical clustered head. The fruit of strawberry blite is bright red, berry-like, juicy but not sweet.

The leaves and tender shoots are said to make a good pot herb and the rather insipid, seedy berries can be cooked but may be best sprinkled raw on salads. It has been used externally in decoctions for ulcers of the throat and mouth. Indian war paint was made from juice of the berries. **Warning:** Avoid eating large quantities of this plant.

**Plantain** It is easy to pull this common weed from the garden without realizing that it is edible and probably more nutritious than most of the greens we tend. Young leaves can be eaten raw in salads and sandwiches, but they soon become tough and stringy. Cooking improves palatability and makes it possible to remove some of the tougher fibres. Fine chopping may also make older leaves easier to eat. The flavour has been likened to that of swiss chard.

Plantain is rich in vitamins A, C and K. The leaves and leaf juice have been widely used in poultices and lotions for treating insect bites and stings, snake bites, sunburn, poison-ivy rashes, sore nipples, blisters, burns and cuts. Rubbing plantain on skin touched by stinging nettle can relieve the burning – you may notice these plants grow near to each other.

**Fireweed** Fireweed has been widely used as greens, either raw or cooked. The young shoots have been likened to asparagus and the young leaves to spinach. The beautiful pink flowers make a colorful addition to salads, and flower-bud clusters can be cooked as a vegetable. Fireweed tea has been enjoyed around the world and fireweed honey is popular in some areas. The stem pith was added to soups as a thickener or dried, boiled, and fermented to make ale. Leaf and flower teas were sometimes used to treat asthma and whooping cough. Plants are rich in beta-carotene and vitamins A and C.

**Wild violets and garden pansies** All violets, including garden varieties such as Johnny jump-ups and garden pansies, are edible. Most leaves are tender and sweet and make an excellent salad green or trail nibble, but they can also be cooked as potherbs or thickeners. The flowers provide pretty, edible garnishes for salads and desserts and delicate flavouring and/or coloring for vinegar, jelly, syrup, jams and preserves. The leaves and/or flowers have also been steeped in hot water to make tea or fermented to make wine.

Violet plants are rich in Vitamin A and Vitamin C and some contain as much as 4000 ppm salicylic acid (similar to aspirin). The flowers have significant amounts of rutin, a compound that strenghtens capillary blood vessels. **Warning:** Use violets in moderation. Some leaves contain saponin which can cause digestive upset in large quantities. Only the leaves, stems and flowers should be eaten. Violet roots, rootstocks, fruits and seeds contain toxins that can cause severe stomach and intestinal upset, as well as nervousness and respiratory and circulatory depression.

**Shepherd’s Purse** All parts of shepherd’s purse are edible, and these plants were once cultivated for greens. Young, crisp leaves have been used in salads but usually plants were cooked in soups and stews. Shepherd’s purse is said to taste like a cross between turnips and cabbages, and has been recommended as a substitute for spinach. A pinch of baking soda in the cooking water helps to tenderize older plants. The slightly peppery pods and/or seeds can be used like mustard in cooked dishes, or they can be germinated to produce sprouts for salads and sandwiches. The roots, fresh and dried, have been used as a substitute for ginger. These plants are rich in Vitamin C and have been reported to stimulate urination and stop bleeding. The US National Cancer Institute reports that these plants may help to prevent cancer. **Warning:** Seeds contain compounds that stimulate uterine contractions, and should not be eaten during pregnancy.

## POISONOUS PLANTS TO AVOID

**Water Hemlock** Looks similar to cow parsnip. Deadly poisonous.

**Baneberry** A perenial herb with white flowers. Fruit is several-seeded berries, conspicuous being red or white. This poisonous plant, suppresses the vagus nerve and can cause possible cardiac arrest. A single berry can cause acute stomachache, cramps, headache, and circulation failure.

**Buttercup** Contains a juice that can cause skin blisters. This same juice is said to have a “narcotic” effect on livestock if eaten in large quantities. These plants are rendered completely harmless to humans by drying or boiling.