

## Spring edible plants are arriving

by Ed Berg

Tasty edible plants are one of the things I like best about the arrival of spring. I've already enjoyed the first steamed Nettles from the shores of Kachemak Bay, and I'll be gathering more tender young nettles during the next few weeks. They are in the red stage now, but they will soon be turning green.

Many people wince at the thought of eating Nettles, imagining their mouth on fire from the tiny stinging hairs that cover the plant's leaves and stems. Nettles do indeed need to be disarmed, but this is a simple matter. I always wear gloves to collect nettles, then I steam them with a steaming basket. A couple of minutes of heat completely breaks down the inflammatory ingredient and makes the delicious nutty flavor painlessly available. Some folks dry their Nettles on a rack and use them to thicken soups. Drying like steaming also takes out the sting.

Wild Cucumber is another early spring favorite. Later in the season it's called Watermelon Berry or Twisted Stalk, but in early spring the juicy cucumber flavor seems to provide the logical name. The young stems are rather weak and often bend under the weight of the new leaves; this droopy look is an eye-catching trait when it the shoots first appear. Wild Cucumber is an entirely benign plant and children are known to eat the stems (and later the watery berries) in large quantities.

Speaking of children, a fieldtrip for wild edibles is one of the best ways to get the kids out in the woods in the spring. Kids generally love anything to do with eating! For many years I accompanied the Homer 4<sup>th</sup> graders to China Poot Bay for Sea Week in the spring, and our edible plant hikes were always a big hit. At this time of year, leaf buds appear on the spiny Devils Club bushes. When these buds are less than inch long, they are easily broken off and are fun to munch as you walk through the woods.

One of the 4<sup>th</sup> graders' favorite collecting sites was a small bog, where with careful searching they could find last year's berries. Black Crowberries and Low-bush Cranberries (Lingonberries) survive the winter well and are easily spotted. Harder to find but tastier are the Bog Cranberries (True Cranberries) which have thread-like stems and tiny leaves. The plump 1/4"

berries seem much oversized for the almost invisible stems, but this plant puts almost all of its resources into reproduction.

Fireweed shoots will be appearing in the next few weeks. These are best eaten while they are still red and less than 4" long. The abundant upright red stems are hard to miss, and can't be confused with any other native plants at this stage. Like many wild plants Fireweed becomes bitter later in the season as part of its chemical defenses. If you are a plant, it is to your advantage not to be eaten. Most plants have evolved Aanti-herbivory chemicals that make them taste bad or toxic to whoever might eat them. The flavors of the spices enjoyed by humans have evolved over millions of years to prevent critters (such as insects, birds, rabbits, moose, etc.) from eating those plants. Critters however are always evolving counter-measures for breaking down these chemical defenses. Thus we see the well-adapted moose happily eating just about every kind of shrub that we would ever care to plant, regardless of how bad we might think these shrubs taste.

Humans have handled plant chemical warfare by cultivating only the most bland and mild-flavored plants (iceberg lettuce being the extreme case), but this has been at the cost of a reduction of vitamin and mineral value, according to nutritionists.

People sometimes complain that wild plants (i.e., vegetables, not berries) have stronger flavors than they are used to eating. My solution to this is plenty of vinegar-and-oil salad dressing. A spring salad of Fireweed shoots, Wild Cucumber, and Cardamine (with its peppery taste), spiked with sliced tomatoes, and well-dressed with vinegar-and-oil is hard to beat at any price. Of course, some feta cheese and olives never hurt, and I like to add some anchovies!

After the Nettles and Fireweed, we should soon see Fiddlehead Ferns, Dandelions, Clover, Violets, Chickweed, Monkey Flower, and Jewelweed—all great salad herbs, when young.

There is indeed much to eat at this time of year, but some care is needed; you should never eat a plant that you don't know. Children can easily learn to identify the common plants mentioned above, but they

should also learn to identify the few toxic ones such as Baneberry, Poison Hemlock, False Hellebore, Monkshood, and Lupine. Children too should be warned about handling fresh Cow Parsnip (Pushki) stems and foliage, because the oils make some people's skin very sensitive to sunlight and blistering sunburn. This being said, the vast majority of plants on the Kenai Peninsula are either harmless or downright tasty, and it's easy to avoid the troublemakers.

Care should be taken to not overpick the wild plants at a given site. Many critters—including two-legged ones—will be foraging here in the future, and

they should all be able to enjoy nature's bounty.

At the Kenai Refuge bookstore we sell two excellent guidebooks on edible plants. For pocketsize and price, the Co-op Extension's *Wild Edible and Poisonous Plants of Alaska* is the classic at \$4.95. For more details, beautiful photos, and medicinal applications the best of its kind is Jan Schofield's *Discovering Wild Plants: Alaska, Western Canada, the Northwest* at \$34.95.

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