

Foraging for dummies



The first tip when foraging for leaves is, it's best done in the early spring - after that, the leaves tend to get bitter and distinctly chewy. So, our spring bank holiday foraging expedition was a bit late in the annual calendar, but no less nourishing for that.

The next tip, in my view, is never to gather anything from hedgerow or path that's less than 30 inches off the ground. That's the average height of a Great Dane's hip. However, our guides, Jacqui and Kate, didn't seem bothered by such niceties, so I guess maybe it's an individual thing.

And, finally (potentially fatally), there are some very poisonous plants out there, waving their tender spring leaves temptingly in the breeze, or disguising themselves as something less noxious. Hemlock water-dropwort, for example, looks a bit like wild carrot or parsley. Fatal, even in the tiniest quantities. Hemlock smells bad, so why would you, but again looks a bit like wild parsley. Don't let field bindweed fool you into thinking it's wild sorrel (see below). And the humble buttercup with its utterly-buttery glow - deadly.

The [Field Studies Council](#) (FSC) publishes an excellent, waterproof leaflet with illustrated lists of what you can eat and when, and what you MUST avoid, and a recipe or two (but no antidotes).

So, off we set, along the Ridge, and, in order of consumption, the first stop was indeed sorrel. Has a very nice, sharp, lemony taste. Readily available, and, if you can gather enough of it, cooks like spinach, or just eat it as a salad. Comfrey - apparently good as a deep-fry fritter. Bramble leaves - dried, they reportedly make a very good tea that actually does taste of blackberry (unlike those nasty fruit teabags). On, past a verdant beech hedge. The young leaves are allegedly delicious in sandwiches. I can't recommend them without the bread and cheese (tough and fibrous). Clover - red variety - the blossoms always look like they ought to taste of honey, and disappointing don't. But you can use them to make red clover lemonade. First

gather your 40 red clover blossoms, then simmer in 3 cups of water for 5 mins. Strain into a jug, return the liquid to the pan over a low heat; add 1 cup of fresh lemon juice and 3 tbs runny honey, stir to dissolve but don't let it boil. Remove from heat and pour into clean jug. Chill for a couple of hours. To serve, fill 6 glasses with ice, fill to three quarters with lemonade, garnish with blossoms and top off with the soda water. Or just scatter the red petals in a salad (take them off the centre bit, which is woody). Ox-eye daisy petals, similarly, can be sprinkled in a salad - more for the look, although the taste is faintly like peanut.

Young lime. Furry. A bit like eating a flat caterpillar. Not that I have, but as I imagine the experience. Chickweed, plentiful and very good in salads, soups and stir-fries. Dandelion - again, more than plentiful. Has a tendency to bitterness in later life (don't we all), so blanching is recommended. Best eaten very young. Goosegrass - who'd have thought it! Apparently delicious stir-fried and in salad (the tender tips, not the really adhesive bits).

Elderflowers - a safe bet, and I'm told you can tell when it's ripe for gathering by burying your face in the flowers and giving a big sniff. If they smell sweet, pick and turn into elderflower wine. Nettles. Delicious in soup and another spinach substitute (yeah, well - anything green can be boiled down into a green gooey mush, surely?). But have you heard of nettle beer? One kg of young nettle tips, freshly gathered; the peel and juice of two lemons; 600g demerara sugar; 25g cream of tartar; 1 tps dried yeast and 4.8 litres of water. Simmer nettles and lemon peel in the water for 20 mins. Put the sugar and cream of tartar in a large bowl or heatproof jug and strain the hot liquid onto them, stir well and leave to cool to blood temperature. Stir in the lemon juice and yeast, and place the mixture in a warm place, covered, for three days, then move to a cooler room for another two days. Then bottle (using sterilised, strong bottles (note the 'strong' word), lightly corked (note the 'lightly' word - I suspect the contents have a tendency to explode), and drink after a week.

We spent some time looking for fat hen, another spinach substitute, with modest success. Which, sadly, is the drawback. Unless you have all morning to gather your salad, you're probably not going to be able to live off the wild. But there are certainly plenty of munchable goodies to pick and chew as you stroll. In the early spring. Don't forget the FSC leaflet.

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