

# Top Ten Wild Foods for April

Contributed by Cab

April. My favourite month for foraging. The anticipation of March is over, and now we're spoiled for choice; one of the best and easiest to spot wild edible mushrooms, several great green vegetables, herbs, and wild edible flowers are all at their best this month.

Whereas through February and March my top ten cover ten things that are good, the choices from which they're drawn are limited. Now, though, it's my ten absolute favourites from a bewildering array of tasty wild edibles.

I hope you enjoy this list (and April foraging) as much as I'm going to this month. We're kicking off with my absolute favourite wild edible; the humble and much overlooked St Georges mushroom, continuing via one which might be technically illegal to cook (although I personally consider it my civic duty to eat the accursed Japanese knotweed into extinction), via some storming wild spring vegetables to finish with my very favourite wild flower, the charming (and totally gastronomic) cuckoo flower.

As before, this list isn't exhaustive, and it's just my opinion. Many plants mentioned in February and March are still good, and many more that I haven't mentioned are still well worth exploring.

1. St Georges Mushroom (*Tricholoma gambosum*) Traditionally you can expect to see this mushroom from St. Georges day (April 23rd), but I've picked it from the middle of April onwards. For me, it's the first really exciting mushroom of Spring. It's wonderfully meaty, tasty, and a very substantial mushroom; it can be 15cm across if you're very lucky. It grows in rings around the edges of fields, anywhere with relatively undisturbed pasture, and it seems happiest near to trees.

It's really the only big white mushroom of the like in Spring. No volva, no ring, white gills, cap and stem going pale cream with time. It's got a mealy smell, almost meaty.

It's present from April through till June in a good year, and it's an extremely versatile mushroom. Stewed with chicken it makes an unsurpassed chicken and mushroom pie. It's good in omelettes, cooked down for a pate, in pasta sauces, fried in butter, and it dries well, so at the end of a long winter with few mushrooms (if the blewits have let me down!) it's a welcome way to restore my dried stocks. Last year (2004) was a tremendous year for this mushroom where I live; we picked basket loads, ate it nearly every day, dried enough so we still have some, and we've never grown tired of it.

You may find that the older, bigger specimens are too strong in flavour for you; I've never had a problem with that, but if you do then simply use them in smaller portions.

I have no hesitation in recommending this mushroom. I consider this the best wild mushroom to pick.

Pictures at:

<http://www.agarics.org/DatabaseAction.jsp?recordName='St%20George%20Mushroom'>

<http://www.rogersmushrooms.com/gallery/DisplayBlock~bid~5697~gid~.asp>

## 2. Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*)

The almost ineradicable weed we all love to hate!

It is illegal to move any part of this plant. It's almost all meristematic, which means that the bit of stem you move from one site and accidentally drop can take root and become another whole dense patch of light blocking, fast spreading, tarmac cracking nastiness. By transporting any part of this plant you're committing an offence. Be warned!

This indestructable uber-triffid covers a large part of the land area of the UK. It spreads by rhizomes in the ground at a shocking rate, especially if there's a bit of wet ground. My own preferred solution to this problem would be to eat it&hellip;

If you're feeling experimental, cook it out in the field. Pick the young shoots in April when they're no more than a foot tall, slice off the leaves and cook it down with sugar, like rhubarb (to which it is related). It's very tasty. I also make a Japanese knotweed wine which, after a few months in the bottle, is really tasty.

The greens and young shoots are eaten as a vegetable in Japan. A quick Googling will reveal all sorts of uses for it.

Pictures at:

<http://biology.clc.uc.edu/.../Japanese%20Knotweed.JPG>

<http://www.wildmanstevebrill.com/Plants.Folder/Knotweed.html>

## 3. Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) You all know what nettles look like, and probably that you can eat them.

The truth is that most people never try, being put off by the thought of handling a horribly stinging plant. If you can get past that, though, you're set for a real feast. Nettles are best young and tender, so pick the young plants and the tops from older ones. You can make a perfectly good string from those stems, so you don't want to be cooking with them! Gather your nettles with care; wear gloves when picking and preparing them or you'll regret it. Wash them, removing any bits of old stem or any tough material, and then cook them through rather like spinach, adding a little nutmeg. Or use them in soup. They're tasty, and very nutritious.

Pictures at:

<http://www.plant-identification.co.uk/skye/urticaceae/urtica-dioecia.htm>

<http://linnaeus.nrm.se/flora/di/urtica/urtic/urtidio4.jpg>

4. Ground Elder (*Aegopodium podagraria*) What did the Romans ever do for us? They introduced lots of umbellifers. Not convinced? It was the Romans who brought us ground elder, Alexanders, fennel and coriander to name but four!

Ground elder is the blight of many gardeners. Can't dig it out, glyphosate only sometimes works, you're basically stuck with hoeing it down over and over again all year. My solution is to eat it, and keep eating it. It's so good that we already have a whole article on eating ground elder:

[http://www.downsizer.net/.../Eat\\_Your\\_Way\\_to\\_Eradicating\\_a\\_Troublesome\\_Weed/](http://www.downsizer.net/.../Eat_Your_Way_to_Eradicating_a_Troublesome_Weed/)

Pictures at:

[http://www.atlas-roslin.pl/gatunki/Aegopodium\\_podagraria.htm](http://www.atlas-roslin.pl/gatunki/Aegopodium_podagraria.htm)

<http://www.waldhang.de/0106037.html>

5. Coltsfoot (*Tussilago farfara*) Don't go looking for the colts foot shaped leaves of this plant in April, you won't find many of them yet, and they taste bloody awful anyway. What you want is the flowers.

When you find coltsfoot, in old gravel pits, by rivers, by lakes and the like you might just find loads. Huge swathes of golden yellow flowers by the water, taking up the slack when the daffodils of early Spring are dying off. And when you do it's a really handy flower to have. Herbally (I don't go in for herbalism much, except in cases like this where it really, really works) it's a potent anti-tussive, so it's handy to keep some dried for making a herb tea to stop you coughing so much if you get a cold. But I

prefer a more direct approach; I soak them in vodka to achieve a similar thing.

They make a cracking wine, and they're also really pleasant in salads. They look and taste great.

Pictures at:

[http://www.kulak.ac.be/.../klein\\_hoefblad.htm](http://www.kulak.ac.be/.../klein_hoefblad.htm)

[http://www.toyen.uio.no/botanisk/nbf/plantefoto/Tussilago\\_farfara.htm](http://www.toyen.uio.no/botanisk/nbf/plantefoto/Tussilago_farfara.htm)

6. Wild garlic (*Allium ursinum*) Of all the wild relatives of onion you'll come across, this is the best. The dark, glossy leaves of wild garlic grow plentifully in parks, on riverbanks and in woodlands across most of Britain, and it tastes something like hot, garlicky spring onions.

You can pick the bulbs and use them, but I'd urge you not to. A patch will survive the leaves being picked but not the bulbs. I'd like to encourage you to try this plant in salad, mixed with rocket, sorrel and lettuce it's very tasty. Or chop it fine with butter for a strong garlic butter, stuff it under chicken skin when roasting, blend it into potato soup, etc. There's all sorts you can do with it.

The flowers are gorgeous; use them like you would chive flowers. And the flower stems are like thin stalks of garlic flavoured celery; I tend to chew on them when walking in the woods in summer.

Pictures at:

<http://www.kulak.ac.be/.../Daslook/>

<http://www.floralimages.co.uk/pic398.htm>

7. Alexanders (*Smyrniolus satrum*) Alexanders are another umbellifer we can thank the Romans for introducing, they brought it over as a green vegetable, and a superb one it is too. Find it around the coast of much of Britain (being especially common from Anglesey, down and around all the way to Norfolk), and also inland by some roadsides and some waste places, where it can almost inexplicably grow to the exclusion of everything else (for example, I know a place in Cambridge where it smothers out nearly everything else). Pick the young stems and steam them gently, perhaps coating in butter when they're done. Or chop them and add them with stock vegetables in a stew, and they'll impart a delicate, herby flavour unlike anything

else. I personally like to use them to flavour seafood dishes; try adding the chopped leaves to moules mariniere, or dressing crab salads with them. Like any umbellifer, you could do yourself serious harm if you were to mistake one of the poisonous wild relatives of alexanders for the real thing. But don't let that worry you too much, once you get to know the texture and smell you'll have no trouble knowing the real thing.

By April it's looking to flower, so try to select plants that haven't started flowering yet (you oughtn't have any trouble) If you can't then stick to using alexanders as a flavouring or herb.

Pictures at:

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/T1059.HTM>

<http://www.floralimages.co.uk/pic3c9.htm>

8.Fennel (Foeniculum vulgare)There was a time, not so long ago, that fennel was considered an exotic vegetable. So space age that it's the one being fed into a weird cooking machine by Luke's aunt in Star Wars. And this always struck me as odd, because it's been cultivated for so very long, and it's a really common wild plant.

What you'll find in the wild is leafy, green, luscious and every bit as tasty as the bulb or Florentine fennel you can buy. And yes, it does look, taste and smell just like cultivated fennel. It steams well as a green vegetable, it's good raw, and as an accompaniment for fish it's well worth exploring. At this time of year you'll find leafy, almost foamy green fennel whereas later on you can explore the possibilities the flowers and seeds provide for you. More on that later in the year.

Pictures at:

[http://www.ocagcomm.com/weeds\\_slide2.asp](http://www.ocagcomm.com/weeds_slide2.asp)

<http://www.heorot.dk/wyrt-fennel.jpg>

9.Sorrel (Rumex acetosa) Possibly the finest, and certainly the trendiest, of all of the wild greens you'll find. It's a marvellous plant, related to the dock, rhubarb and the evil Japanese knotweed, and it's common throughout most of the

British Isles in hedgerows and woodlands. It forms dense green rosettes of leaves, and has a sharp, almost lemony flavour. Use it raw in salad, add it to potato soup, use it in sauces with meat or fish, in fact anywhere that its sharp flavour can be appreciated it'll find a place in your kitchen. In April you'll find that sorrel is growing like mad and throwing forth its first tentative flower stalks of the year; the tight green growth of February and the straggleness of March has become a big mass of luscious green leaves. Pick it now for salad, eat it in sandwiches with cream cheese and tomatoes, cook it in a sauce for fish... The uses for sorrel are almost endless, as French cooks have known for years (like the French, I have no understanding of why most Brits don't eat a lot more sorrel!).

Until you get the nose for picking sorrel, be very careful; the young leaves of ladies fingers, a deadly poisonous plant, can look somewhat similar to an untrained eye. Keep your eyes open for your first season looking at such plants, by midsummer you'll be happily eating sorrel.

Pictures at:

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/P3/P34743.HTM>

[http://honeybee.helsinki.fi/.../kasvit\\_tiet\\_ens/rumex\\_acetosa.htm](http://honeybee.helsinki.fi/.../kasvit_tiet_ens/rumex_acetosa.htm)

10. Cuckoo Flower (*Cardamine pratensis*) This is my favourite wild flower, and it's an absolute hands down gobsmackingly pretty wild plant. It's the only thing that can, for me, trump wild violets (which I also adore). I can't really say why, it's a fairly unassuming little brassica, but the colour of its little pinkish purple flowers, and the little spears of them that appear over fenland, by river banks and lakes all over the UK in April I find totally charming. There's a lot of variation in the flower colour; purply-pink through to white, but they're all quite enchanting.

There's not a lot to this plant, a little rosette of leaves and a flower stem in the mud. But do try eating it; the flowers are so pretty in a salad, and the leaves are surprisingly hot and pungent. Not one to eat on its own, but blended with other leaves it's most tasty.

Pictures at:

<http://cabd0.tripod.com/cabsmushroompage/id11.html>

[http://www.fungoceva.it/erbe\\_ceb/cardamina\\_pratensis.htm](http://www.fungoceva.it/erbe_ceb/cardamina_pratensis.htm)