

# Top Ten Wild Foods for May

Contributed by cab

Foraging in May is a real joy. Summer is arriving, the air is full of the sound of birds and the smell of summer blooms, and it's a pleasure just wandering about in the great outdoors. Going home with a basket full of goodies is just an added bonus.

I don't want to get your hopes up TOO high, but in the last couple of Mays I've landed monster hauls of mushrooms. So much so I've got into some domestic trouble; but what better way is there to spend an anniversary than by preparing St Georges mushrooms, horse mushrooms and fairy ring mushrooms for drying? But as well as the mushrooms we have some real gems in the plant kingdom; elder flowers, burdock, alexanders&hellip; the list goes on and on.

As before, this top ten isn't exhaustive, and it's just my opinion. I drew up a shortlist for May and came up with more than 20 species that I would highly recommend. So this is my list of the ten that I absolutely wouldn't miss in May, starting with a couple of mushrooms, including a great flower, and finishing on what may be the best of all the wild green vegetables you can find.

Note that a lot of the things mentioned in earlier months are still good; look out for sorrel, chickweed, alexanders, cow parsley, lesser celandines, daisies, hogweed, etc. Most of them are still good for a while yet, if you choose your specimens carefully. 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. Lots of the older guide books will tell you that you're more likely to find it a week later than that, but most years (in these days of warm, wet springs) I find it from about then. It is in May that this mushroom reaches its peak. In a good year, you can find this one by the basket load all through May and into June, and it's bounty I'd hate to miss. For me, it's the first really exciting mushroom of Spring. It's wonderfully meaty, tasty, and very substantial; 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.

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/.../eorge%20Mushroom> <http://www.rogersmushrooms.com/.../~5697~gid~.asp> 2. Chicken of the Woods (*Laetiporus sulfureus*)

Another of my favourites, one I've found first in May every year for the past five. It's an odd looking critter; bright yellow, tiny pores on the underside, bright orange on top, and it grows in thumping great brackets on the side of dead trees and stumps. And if you find some, you might easily find five or ten kilos.

There are a few things to be aware of when picking this mushroom. Firstly, there's some evidence that if it's growing on either yew or eucalyptus, it might be poisonous. Secondly, you really only want it when it's young and juicy; it gets old and woody later, and it isn't good eating any more. Thirdly, there are some extremely rare examples of children hallucinating after eating this mushroom. So don't feed it to any tiny tots.

Other than that, munch away. It's remarkable just how much this mushroom really does taste like chicken, so I recommend making the most of that by adding it to chicken stews and curries. I like to keep some in the freezer, ready to be diced up and marinated in olive oil and herbs, making an ideal barbecue treat for vegetarians. Pictures at: <http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/T1785.HTM> [http://www.bluewillowpages.com/mushroomexpert/laetiporus\\_sulphureus.html](http://www.bluewillowpages.com/mushroomexpert/laetiporus_sulphureus.html) 3. Fairy Ring Mushroom (*Marasmius oreades*)

Be careful with this one. Really careful. You could mistake one of the toxic *Clitocybe* species or it, and that wouldn't be good. Could be fatal. But once you get the eye for this mushroom, it's a cracker, it really is.

A lot of people write books on wild foods that you can find in immaculate woodlands that you never ever get to. They tell you about chanterelles, ceps, morels and the like. What they don't tell you about is this little mushroom that forms most of the fairy rings in parks, football pitches, school playing fields, etc. And it has an almondy, mushroomy flavour as good as any other mushroom.

It's not big, so you want to pick plenty for a meal. This isn't a problem; you might find rings that are ten

yards across or more, with hundreds of mushrooms on them. You get them from Spring through till Autumn, but in May they're at their best because there is less chance of them being full of maggots. As you pick them, pull the stipe (stem) out and look at where it joins the cap; you want there to be no maggot holes there.

And best of all, they dry very well. Thread the caps onto cotton and hang them somewhere warm to dry. Pictures at: [http://www.mykoweb.com/CAF/species/Marasmius\\_oreades.html](http://www.mykoweb.com/CAF/species/Marasmius_oreades.html)[http://botit.botany.wisc.edu/toms\\_fungi/mar2003.html](http://botit.botany.wisc.edu/toms_fungi/mar2003.html) 4. 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. Or even make nettle beer. 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> 5. 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, garlic 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 flavour, stuff it under chicken skin when roasting, blend it into potato soup, etc. There are innumerable things to 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/.../Allium%20ursinum%20-%20Daslook/http://www.floralimages.co.uk/pic398.htm> 6. Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) It's not necessary for me to tell you how to spot this flower in May. The frothy white umbels of flowers on the lush green (and slightly smelly) elder tree are a familiar site in hedgerows, parks and woodlands across the UK. The folklore and uses of the elder are as broad only as its distribution; whole volumes could be filled with recipes for the flowers and the berries. For the moment, it's the flowers you're after, and if you've never tried them you are seriously missing out. Whether you make an elderflower wine, or the almost soft elderflower 'champagne', sorbet, or fritters (dip the umbel in thin batter, deep fry till golden, trim off the stem and serve with honey, it's one of the most divine desserts you will ever experience), do try them. Pictures at: [http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/history/herbarium/sambucus\\_nigra.htm](http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/history/herbarium/sambucus_nigra.htm)<http://www.natur-lexikon.com/Texte/.../wp00027-Holunder.html> 7. Asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*) Yes, this is the same plant as garden asparagus. Don't go looking for any of the rare wild asparagus plants such as bath asparagus; you probably won't find them, and if you do it's irresponsible to pick them. Go for this one if you can, because it's every bit as good as freshly picked asparagus from anywhere else. It's more common than you might imagine as a garden escapee; good plants can persist for decades in the wild, grown from discarded cuttings, overgrown allotments or spread birds eating the berries. Old railway embankments seem to be a favourite spot for it. You'll probably spot it by the fern like growth. Don't mistreat your wild plant, but shepherd it and pick sparingly. It can spare the odd spear, but it'll struggle to out-compete other weeds if you treat it too harshly. And get home with the spears FAST. The sooner it's steamed and eaten, the tastier it is. Pictures at: <http://linnaeus.nrm.se/flora/mono/asparaga/aspar/aspaoff2.jpg><http://www.aphotoflora.com/Asparagus%20officinalis27-06-04.jpg> 8. Water mint (*Mentha aquatica*) Perhaps the commonest of our wild mints, watermint can be found growing in massive profusion by many lakes, ponds and rivers. It's a tasty, slightly bitter mint that is well suited to a number of culinary uses. It is in my opinion the finest mint to have with new potatoes, it makes a great mint sauce, and it's superb for making mint wine. It is perhaps a little bitter for some of the uses you'd put garden mint to, and it's not the choicest of mints for tea, but other than that it can rightfully take its place in the repertoire of any enterprising forager. Try it, you'll find uses for it. Pictures at: <http://www.ibiblio.org/.../mentha-aquatica-1.htm><http://makeashorterlink.com/?L5DC45BEA> 9. Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) Another plant so common that you can't avoid it, and one of the most useful wild plants I know. You can eat every party of it (other than perhaps the fluffy 'clock'), and generally it tastes good. I say 'generally' because it does vary in taste a good deal, and on a holiday to Cornwall a couple of years ago we couldn't find any that weren't horribly bitter in any of the nearby hedgerows. Mix it with other wild and cultivated leaves for a super salad; with lettuce and rocket it's a great extra flavour. Dress the salad with bacon fat and croutons and you've got something a bit special. Or use the flowers to make your salads look better - pick the petals off and sprinkle them over the green leaves. The flowers also make one of the classic country wines. Pictures at: <http://www.bwca.cc/wildflowers/.../dandelion.jpg><http://weedeco.msu.montana.edu/.../dandelion.jpg> 10. Sea beet (*Beta vulgaris* var. *maritima*)

If I lived close to the sea, almost anywhere in the UK, then I wouldn't grow spinach or chard in my garden, I'd rely on this superb wild vegetable. It grows profusely on cliffs and by dunes near the sea (the above picture was taken at Tintagel in Cornwall), and it tastes just like spinach, only sometimes it's slightly salty. It is, in fact, the wild relative of spinach, and you can sometimes spot that there's been some hybridisation (you find some wild cultivars that have bigger leaves, odd colouration, etc). And to be honest you can use it like spinach; try the leaves raw first, find out whether the specimen is good enough for salad, but if it isn't then it'll cook as well as spinach. Pictures at: <http://193.62.154.38/celtica/Shoreplants/Betavulgarismaritimab.html> [http://www.biol.paisley.ac.uk/research/Asilverside/Wigtown/photo1/Beta\\_vulgaris.html](http://www.biol.paisley.ac.uk/research/Asilverside/Wigtown/photo1/Beta_vulgaris.html)

To ask Cab and other Downsizers about foraging in May, visit the Foraging forum