

Top Ten Wild Foods for June

Contributed by Cab

June is a bit of a wild-card month. All of a sudden, it's summer, but some years you'd never know it; the weather can range from a soggy late Spring to a blustery Autumnal. Still, most years the sun comes eventually in June, and that will yield the enterprising forager his first big harvests of fruit of the year, some of his most thrilling finds of the year!

A walk in June can be a precious thing; what with holidays, summer social engagements, school holidays, the garden and the allotment taking up so much time, you may wonder struggle to find the time to get out at all. But even if you only manage a single jaunt to the local woods or hedgerows, you will, with a bit of luck, come home with a basket brimming full with seasonal fruits and greens.

As always, these aren't by any means the only ten of the month, nor are they the ones that everyone might choose. Keep your eye out for greens that are mentioned in previous months' articles, and bear in mind that regional variation may mean that you're still finding more things from the May article this month. These ten are, however, picked to cover every base, from the cool 'Spring' Junes to the blazing hot Junes that didn't really happen when you were younger. Each of them is among the easiest to identify this month, and they're all well worth a go. 1. Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*)

I cannot praise this little berry highly enough. It's got the most wonderful, intense flavour; if you think you know a good strawberry, but you haven't tasted a wild strawberry, then I heartily suggest that you go rummaging through your local woodlands from late June onwards looking for some. They're small and easy to overlook, but remember that the leaves are more or less the same as domestic varieties and they become much easier to spot. And the intensity of their flavour is quite unparalleled; think of all of the flavour you have in a big cultivated strawberry packed into a fruit the size of your little fingernail, and you're getting close.

You'll find them more often than not on chalky soil, and as often as not they will be escaped alpine strawberry plants rather than true wild ones (the picture above is alpine berries). Use them sparingly in desserts, but do use them; any recipes in which you would use strawberries will do. To be honest, mine rarely make it as far as the basket to be carried home…

Pictures at:

http://www.toyen.uio.no/botanisk/nbf/plantefoto/fragaria_vesca_Per_M_Hagen01.jpg

<http://www.naturewatchbaltic.org/tools/booklets/sanddune/foto/fragaria-vesca.jpg>

2. St. George's Mushrooms (*Tricholoma gambosum*)

The St. Georges mushroom season comes to a tragic end in June, but perhaps if you've been gorging yourself on it since April that's no bad thing. If you haven't done so already, think about drying some for the rest of the year around now.

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, growing usually in rings or troops in pasture or woodland edges. It's got a mealy smell, almost

meaty; by June there are other not too dissimilar mushrooms beginning to appear, so be sure to make certain of your ID before eating.

You may find that the older, bigger specimens are too strong in flavour for you, and that's especially true of the late season specimens; I've never had a problem with that, but if you do then simply use them in smaller portions. I'd normally recommend eating them with chicken in pies or stews, but recently I've been eating them with pork in Chinese dishes and having some success with such recipes. It's a very versatile fungus!

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.agarics.org/.../eorge%20Mushroom)

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

3. Red Currant (and White Currant) (*Ribes rubrum*)

This is usually the first really good haul of wild fruit of the year, so it's a very welcome find. It's one of those bushes that seems to be really common in some places and quite rare elsewhere; I have one local patch that fruits extremely well, so I consider myself very lucky. I've found it growing thickly in hedgerows as far apart as Northumberland and Cornwall, and I've picked them up in Cumbernauld and have heard that they grow in the Scottish Isles, so your chances of finding some can't be all that bad.

The plant is essentially the same as the domestic varieties, but free of the constraints that a garden puts on it this bush seems to thrive. It's rare that you'll see it harmed by the pests that can plague your garden (such as the sawfly that decimated my own garden shrubs last year!), and very often it will spread by natural 'layering' due to the weight of fruit pulling branches down to the ground where they root, and by root suckers.

You can use the fruit as you would any other red currants, and if you have a good haul then they make great jelly, an excellent wine, and they are an essential ingredient in summer puddings. If you have only a few then use them as a garnish, or eat them on your walk. They make a good accompaniment uncooked with roast game.

Also to look out for is the whitecurrant. This not uncommon variant of the red currant can often be found on the bush till long after the birds have stripped all of the reds away, it's almost like the birds don't see them.

Pictures at:

<http://www.rhs.org.uk/gardens/wisley/images/whitecurrant.jpg>

4. Black Currant (*Ribes nigrum*)

Like the red currant, the black currant isn't uncommon wild and as an escapee in our countryside. The intensity of flavour in blackcurrants is something you couldn't imagine if you've never really eaten them in any form other than Ribena, and as a wild fruit it's as useful as nearly anything other than blackberries. It makes a great wine, an unsurpassed jam, an excellent summer pudding, a fine cordial, etc.

What is perhaps less well known is that the leaves, picked young, have a flavour not unlike the fruit themselves. Don't go stripping the plants of leaves, but don't feel too guilty about taking a few to mix in with a salad, or to have in a cheese sandwich. They're well worth a try.

It isn't that rare for the three fruits to co-naturalise from a garden together; if you find red, white or black currants or gooseberries growing on an old embankment or hedgerow, keep your eyes open for the others.

Pictures at:

http://ispb.univ-lyon1.fr/cours/botanique/photos_dicoty/dico%20Q%20a%20Z/Ribes%20nigrum.jpg

<http://oregonstate.edu/dept/hort/hort251/blcurfrt.jpg>

5. Elder (*Sambucus nigra*)

It's not necessary for me to tell you how to spot this flower, which appears in May in some areas, and will continue flowering most of the way through June. The frothy white umbels of flowers on the lush green (and slightly smelly) elder tree are a familiar sight 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.natur-lexikon.com/Texte/.../wp00027-Holunder.html>

6. Cherry (*Prunus avium*)

This deciduous tree is common in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, but more sparse as you head into the North of Scotland. It's the first of the wild species, which include slow, plum, damson, greengauge and if you are really lucky almond (an unlikely, but not unheard of wildling in Britain) to ripen.

I once had an odd conversation with my next door neighbour about cherries. I was picking some cherries from a tree obligingly planted by the council (local authorities plant thousands of cherry trees for the flowers, something the keen eyed forager can delight in), and she recognised me, and walked over looking concerned. 'What are you doing?' she asked. 'Picking cherries', I replied. 'How do you know they're cherries?', she asked, to which I could only reply 'Errrm, they're growing on a cherry tree.'

She hasn't said anything much to me since.

Cherries are common in the wild and in parks and gardens nearly everywhere, and other than the birds you'll have little competition; people are rather reticent to go raiding cherry trees for fear of looking foolish. The fruit might be big, sweet and juicy or they might be devoid of much flesh and bitter, but you won't know what the fruit of any one tree will be like till you try them. The only down side is that good ones will disappear from the tree very, very fast. When you find a good tree, keep a close eye on it so that as the fruit ripens you beat the birds to SOME of it!

For the true cherry lover, try stoning out a bowl full (you can buy a little gadget to make this easier) and making a summer pudding out of only cherries, with no other fruit. You won't be disappointed.

Pictures at:

<http://faculty.etsu.edu/mcdowelt/Photos%20Use%5CPrunus%20avium%20FI.jpg>

<http://phoenix.4u.org/aylasplants/pics/bigpics/cherry.jpeg>

7. Fat Hen (*Chenopodium album*)

Fat hen is an unsung hero of wild food. It's an unassuming little plant at this time of year, but it has the potential to grow to a good metre and a half or more. Then it will shed its seeds and die, only to come back by the million on the same patch next year. Most likely you weed this one out of your garden or allotment every time you hoe, and every time

it comes back, so common are the seeds.

The leaves and the seeds have been part of mans diet in the British Isles for as long as he's been here; the seeds especially have been found in the stomachs of ice age bodies preserved in bogs. And that's hardly surprising; in much of Britain you can't turn a spade without encouraging this weed to grow, and as it's a very nutritious weed it was very likely eaten in abundance as it invaded agricultural land.

The leaves are the bit you want; cook them down like spinach, and unlike all of the other wild leaves you CAN cook like spinach, these ones are better than spinach is! If they're young, eat them raw.

A close relative of fat hen, good King Henry, can be used in much the same way.

Pictures at:

<http://www.crocus.co.uk/pestscards/?comboid=87>

<http://w3.yhc.edu/external/bio/chenopodium.jpg>

8. Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*)

Comfrey is most commonly found on wet ground, but this thug of a plant can appear more or less anywhere. If you haven't got an eye for it, then make sure you wait till it flowers before eating any; the leaves of foxglove (which can be lethally toxic) can be somewhat similar, but of course the flowers are very different.

Most often comfrey flowers will be white (like the illustrated plant), but wild varieties that are pink, even purple, are not uncommon.

While you CAN cook this one like spinach, that's a waste. Eat spinach instead. I've included this in my top ten for one reason; comfrey fritters.

Make a thick batter, and dip the young leaves in, holding on to the stalk. Deep fry till golden brown, and serve with salt and vinegar. I love this snack to pieces.

Comfrey also makes a fine soup, and it's excellent in stir fries. Always use the young leaves, as when they age they become tough and bitter.

Pictures at:

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/P3/P34390.HTM>

<http://jata.vampula.net/kasvio/kuvat/rohtoraunioyrtti1.jpg> 9. Horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*)

This is another thug of a weed, and it's to be found on roadsides, waste places and field edges throughout most of Britain. It's one of the few wild plants that I'll ever suggest using the root of, because sure enough if you dig it up it will come back, and it'll be as mean as it was before. Make sure you ask land owners permission before digging, as otherwise you'll be breaking the law.

It's easy to spot; it's like dock, only the leaves are glossier, shinier, and more upright. They're also very likely to be growing in massive abundance when you find a good patch of horseradish. The flowers are white, on long spikes, and make it clear to us that horseradish is unrelated to dock.

You will need a spade, as the root is both tough and very, very penetrating. Expect to have to dig deep. What you want is a good, fat root. When you get it, peel it carefully, and make absolutely sure not to scratch your eyes or anywhere else sensitive, as to do so will be excruciatingly painful. Use the root as soon as possible after picking, as the heat and flavour fade fast. Grated for sauce, or merely to be sprinkled on roast beef, it's a defining part of British cuisine. I like it with smoked mackerel, and it is a traditional accompaniment to smoked eel

Pictures at:

http://www.uni-graz.at/~katzer/pictures/armo_01.jpg

http://aoeu.standardout.com/pics/pdb_Weezingreens_2002-09-14_1032059629155.jpg

10. Dewberry (*Rubus csesius*)

Many wild food writers treat the dewberry as the 'poor relative' amongst the wild species, and I think that's a terrible shame. This wrangling, spreading shrub lies closer to the ground than the blackberry, and it tends to ripen a little earlier in reflected warm sunlight as a consequence. It's as tasty as a blackberry, but it is softer, making picking it potentially messy. However, some local variants are big, juicy, and tasty, so it is well worth exploring.

The berries look kind of downy, but that's nothing to be bothered by. They have a natural bloom to them like grapes and plums, and this is probably how you will first learn to distinguish dewberries from blackberries.

They can be put to any of the uses blackberries can be used for, but as they're no better, and as picking fruit so low to the ground can be back breaking work, wait till blackberries appear for making jams and wines. Eat your dewberries simply with other fruit and a little cream; the combination of dewberries and white currants is to die for.

Pictures at:

<http://linnaeus.nrm.se/flora/di/rosa/rubus/rubucae3.jpg>

http://www.natuureducatie.nl/gallery/rubus_caes_1.jpg