

Top Ten Wild Foods for July

Contributed by cab

July sees the prime of summer foraging. This month you can expect to pick a greater variety of wild fruits than any other, and while there are some greens and the first of the summer mushrooms it is the fruit that you'll be concentrating on this month. July is a month of summer plenty, in the woods, in hedgerows, and in parks.

If you've been reading these monthly articles for a while now, you'll recognise some of the entries from last month; and in addition to those species I've chosen to include, bear in mind that many of the entries in previous months will remain good for the rest of summer. You'll also find marsh samphire, bilberries, the first hazelnuts, sow thistle, field and horse mushrooms, and countless other wild edibles not covered here. Remember, this is merely my own top list for the month, and it's the tip of the iceberg of what is out there to eat.

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'd 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 you'll find 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.

2. Chanterelle (*Cantharellus cibarius*) This is one of the most highly prized wild mushrooms, and although I agree that it's a good mushroom (wouldn't be in my top ten for the month otherwise), I've always been of the opinion that it's over-rated. Still, it's a tasty find, and on occasion in pine and mixed woodlands you'll find it abundantly. It's an odd mushroom, being very primitive in appearance, with the gills being poorly defined, more like invaginations of the body of the mushroom than gills. The flavour isn't intense, but it's most pleasant; peppery, slightly fruity and very aromatic. Make use of that by soaking in vodka, for one of the more unique liquors you'll ever taste. Or cook simply in olive oil and butter, adding to pasta when done. Either way, they're worth a shot. It's worth noting that there's a little confusion with the name here; while us Brits have known this mushroom as a chanterelle for generations, the French use the word chanterelle to refer to a different mushroom, the winter chanterelle (*Cantharellus infundibuliformis*), and call *Cantharellus cibarius* by the name of girolle. Regrettably, supermarket chains will tend to go with the French nomenclature! You can of course mistake some other mushrooms for chanterelles, and it's beyond the scope of this article to explain how to identify the mushroom. Suffice to say that it's worth being cautious, and before eating your first specimens make sure you're familiar with the false chanterelle and similar species. The chanterelle is a mycorrhizal species; that means that it grows in association with certain trees, in my experience does best with pine trees. You'll also find that like many mushrooms, you'll find it again and again on the same patch.

3. Gooseberry (*Ribes uva-crispa*) I'm sure that the gooseberry needs no introduction, but you may be surprised to learn that it isn't uncommon in hedgerows, on railway embankments, and anywhere else where it may have escaped from gardens. The specimen pictured here yielded a good four kilos last year, and I didn't seem to have dented the number of berries on it. You'll find all manner of varieties wild, red, green and yellow, but most often the berries will be a little smaller than the domestic ones. No one prunes the wild ones, so you get more, but smaller fruit. But despite being a bit small, they're good to eat nonetheless; they make a good wine, they make superb jam (especially when mixed with a few elderflowers, which may still be clinging to the plants), and they're superb in fools, crumbles, etc. My only word of caution here is that gooseberries bear hard, sharp thorns; be warned, a long session picking gooseberries will hurt. If you find a specimen you really like, take a cutting, and grow it on at home. Better yet, go back when it's first coming into leaf next Spring and try it. Odds are that if it's doing well in the wild near you, it's well suited to local conditions!

4. Black Currant (*Ribes nigrum*) I mentioned black currants last month, but they really tend to come into their own in July rather than June. Blackcurrants aren'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. The leaves are edible, but by July they're a bit tough and nasty. Remember where you saw the plants, and come back in spring to try a few leaves. It isn't that rare for the three *Ribes* 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.

5. Raspberries (*Rubus idaeus*) If you're reading this as a native Brit, then be proud, your raspberries are the best in the world. Our climate suits them wonderfully; you struggle to grow them in the Mediterranean region, where you have to go

looking for them at altitude. The name *Rubus idaeus* gets its name from Mount Ida, in Asia Minor, where at one time it covered the upper slopes of the mountain, and young men used to climb up for the berries, or so they say. If you're Scottish you can be particularly smug, because the wild raspberries in your home land are truly superb; you'll find them in the most surprising places, I've seen them growing in Lochalsh, Aberdeen, Inverness, Glasgow, on the shores of Loch Lomond, in mountain valleys on Skye... They seem to love the climate. But don't lament too much if you're not in Scotland, they seem to be more localised elsewhere, but common enough in many localities. As for most wild fruit, they're extremely variable; yellow varieties, summer fruiting varieties, autumn fruiting varieties, and as you'd expect it's hard to tell the truly wild ones (if there really are any left) from the garden escapees. Use them just how you would cultivated berries. As well as the three *Rubus* species in the monthly top ten articles (dewberry, raspberry and in the coming months blackberry), look out for chinese bramble (*R. tricolor*), salmonberry (*R. specabilis*) and garden escapees of the various hybrids like tayberry, loganberry, etc; I've seen all of these fruit so prolifically in the wild that you could pick enough for wine or jam. Don't waste time looking for the rare and unprolific cloudberry in the UK. Pictures

at:http://www.toyen.uio.no/botanisk/.../rubus_idaeus_Jan_Wesenberg01.jpg<http://www.aphotoflora.com/Rubus%20idaeus-fruit-21-08-04.jpg>6. Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) This is another one the Romans did for us. It's an introduced umbellifer (like ground elder, coriander and alexanders, all of which are more palatable than another introduced relative, the deadly poisonous hemlock). Some time around July (earlier down South, later up North) it starts flowering; it then produces tasty little seeds that can be dried or used fresh. It will also continue producing stems and leaves till the frosts, and picked sparingly a modest patch of wild fennel will see you set for salad and herb use all year. Find it on roadsides, waste places, flourishing anywhere it can get a bit of sun. Although it's an introduced plant, there is some variation in specimens; the picture above is a bronze fennel I found growing on a roadside after some pipes were laid, four years ago, and now it's a happy little patch of fennel. Pictures

at:<http://biology.smsu.edu/Herbarium/.../Foeniculum%20vulgare%20var.%20rubrum%20-%201.jpg>http://pharm1.pharmazie.uni-greifswald.de/systematik/7_bilder/c920/C92-1879.jpg7. Fat Hen (*Chenopodium album*) Fat hen is an unsung hero of wild food. What started a few weeks ago as sweet little silvery leaved things will now be a four foot tall monster trying to shade out your veg patch, and threatening to spread seed all over the place. A tasty, but oddly irritating weed, able to grow fast enough to shade out all but the most determined seedlings! Any patch of soil I turn over on my allotment is soon a blanket of fat hen. The leaves and the seeds have been part of man's 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! Or raw in salads, this is a versatile weed. 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. Common mallow (*Malva sylvestris*) I'm a sucker for pretty flowers that you can eat, and this is one of them. It's a common, rather weedy looking plant with rounded, dark green leaves. The leaves can be eaten in soup (look up recipes for Egyptian melochia soup), as a cooked green (though they're oddly gelatinous!), or as a 'base' salad green with other, strongly flavoured leaves. The flowers themselves make a superb garnish, and both the flower buds and the seed pods (when unripe) make tasty snacks. I've found this to be abundant in South East England, and a bit less common elsewhere in England. I've not found much of it in Scotland or Wales, but keep your eye out anyway. Pictures

at:<http://bellquell.scuole.bo.it/scuole/.../MALVA%20SYLVESTRIS.jpg><http://www.kulak.ac.be/facult/wet/biologie/.../kaasjeskruid-01.jpg>9. Borage (*Borago officinalis*) Another of the pretty edible flowers that I'm a sucker for, and this one, I think you'll agree, is exquisite. Whether you've fallen for the oh-so-posh pimms and lemonade with a borage flower in it (try it, it's good) or whether you use the flowers as a garnish, these little blue stars are worth using, they're mildly flavoured like cucumber, and very pretty. The leaves can be cooked down like spinach, but don't taste of much. If you get them really young, before they become furry (almost to the point of being spiny), then they're worth chopping into salads. This plant isn't all that common, but when you find it you'll most likely find plenty of it; it spreads prolifically in small areas. Pictures at:<http://www.boga.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/html/Borago.officinalis.ho2.JPG>http://www.desert-tropicals.com/Plants/Boraginaceae/Borago_officinalis.jpg10. Cherry plum (*Prunus cerasifera*) This is the first of the wild plums to ripen; the cherry plum (similar to the cultivated mirabelle) is a sugary sweet creature, almost indistinguishable from the tiny wild plums you'll find in hedgerows across the British isles. It can be red or yellow, and it's a most useful fruit. It makes a jam second only to damson amongst all the plums, a mean plum sauce for duck, a super wine, and on top of that you can eat it straight from the tree. Start keeping your eyes open from around the middle of the month in the South of England, if not earlier, towards the end of the month and into August further North. In some places entire hedgerows are planted with cherry plum, which can net you tens of kilos of fruit if you beat the birds to it. Pictures

at:http://www.desert-tropicals.com/Plants/Boraginaceae/Borago_officinalis.jpg<http://www.extension.umn.edu/yardandgarden/YGLNews/images2/compasscherry.jpg>

at:http://www.desert-tropicals.com/Plants/Boraginaceae/Borago_officinalis.jpg<http://www.extension.umn.edu/yardandgarden/YGLNews/images2/compasscherry.jpg>