

Top Ten Wild Foods for August

Contributed by cab

The heady month of August is one of transition for the forager, it is a month where we can expect to move away from the fruit and green leaves of Spring and early Summer and go off in search of the late summer bounty.

We're getting towards the end of the growing season for many wild fruit, and so many of them are ripening around now that we're almost spoiled for choice; pretty much anywhere in the country you're likely to find something growing so prolifically that you'll struggle to use all that you can pick. And if that isn't enough, now is also the time for so a spot of summer mushrooming.

As ever, these are my personal choices for the month, and your opinions are likely to differ from mine. I haven't included marsh samphire (a succulent vegetable found on salt marshes, and good at this time of year) or bilberries (great dark blue berries found in the hills across a lot of the British Isles), and they're both well worth having. I've based my own picks on what I most like eating, what I find most useful and what I most often find. And for one of my choices below, I really am setting myself up to be shot down…

1. Horse Mushrooms, Field mushrooms, etc. (edible species of *Agaricus*)

You all know *Agaricus*. They're the shop bought mushrooms (*A. bisporus*), field mushrooms (*A. campestris*) and horse mushrooms (*A. arvensis*). But the genus doesn't end there, and within it there are many more cracking mushrooms.

The art of mushrooming is one that is well worth learning. It starts when you find one mushroom (a field mushroom or a horse mushroom, most often), then you look around for other obvious patches of white… Maybe you'll find them growing in rings or troops, maybe they'll be little things nestled in the long grass and you'll need to walk slowly up and down the field to find them. My own favourite trick is to look for high ground; I'll stand on a gate, climb into a tree or whatever I can find to see whether there are spots or possible rings in a field; you can find them very often by the pattern of darker coloured grass.

The field mushroom really is very like a shop bought mushroom, with white flesh bruising ever so slightly pink, pink gills turning slowly brown, and an intense, pleasantly sweet mushroomy smell. The horse mushroom is a bigger cousin of the field mushroom, growing the size of a dinner plate, staining faintly yellow as it ages, with gills that start out almost white, ageing through pink to brown.

Another pasture mushroom is *A. macrosporus*, a mushroom that fruits prolifically in rings (many *Agaricus* do this) in some pastures. It seems to come in a rush, all at once, and you might find many kilos in a single ring. This isn't such a crisis, as all of the edible *Agaricus* mushrooms dry well. Near the coast, look out for *A. bernardii*, a common inhabitant of sand dunes and coastal pastures.

The main bad guy here is the yellow stainer, *A. xanthodermus*. Looking at it from a distance it is very like a horse mushroom, and until you really get your eye in or until you get really close you'll be disappointed nearly every time you pick one up. When you bruise it, it stains an intense, vivid yellow, and it also smells rather like carbolic; less mushroomy and more chemical. The ring (the remains on the stem of where the cap joined on before opening) is also much bigger than in the related edible species. While some people get away with eating this one, others can be hospitalised by it. The lesson here is that it is rare that having a general idea about what a mushroom is can be considered enough!

Wandering from the fields into woodlands, there are more *Agaricus* to find. Many of them have brown, scaly caps, and will stain pinkish as they age or when cut. *A. langei*, *A. silvaticus* and *A. silvicola* can be found in coniferous and mixed woods, *A. vaporarius* prefers deciduous woods. But the star, the gem in the genus (at least in woodlands) is commonly known as The Prince, *A. augustus*. This intensely almond flavoured mushroom can grow prolifically some years (2004 was good) and then almost disappear. But when it does fruit well there is no better, more enjoyable mushroom. It grows in rings, often forming thick clumps of mushrooms that can weigh half a kilo or more.

Full identification of all of the species of *Agaricus* species is beyond the scope of this article; I urge interested readers to peruse Roger Phillips' excellent website for details (www.rogersmushrooms.com).

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 pleasant; peppery, slightly fruity and very aromatic. Make use of that by soaking in vodka, for one of the more unique liqueurs you'll ever taste. Or cook simply in olive oil and butter, adding to pasta when done. Either way, they're worth a shot.

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. Giant Puffball (*Langermannia gigantea*)

The giant puffball is a mammoth amongst mushrooms. It is a near spherical fungal fruiting body, somewhere between a few inches and a yard or more in diameter. It is attached to the ground by a thin stem, which breaks upon ripening allowing the puffball to dry out and release spores (sometimes for a year or two) as it rolls about in the wind.

If you are lucky enough to find a young, fresh specimen (it **MUST** be white all the way through; as it yellows, eventually turning green and brown, it will make you sick) then you are in for a real treat. Take it home (laughing manically as you do so), slice it into half inch steaks, and fry it (battered or covered in egg and breadcrumbs if you like). It's kind of like a strongly mushroom flavoured marshmallow. Or dice it for stews and soups, slice it up and add some olive oil, put in a pot and bake it... Even stuff it with mince and its own chopped innards before baking (the smell it gives out when you cook it that way is almost overpowering!). Whatever you do with it, it is a fine tasting mushroom.

Different guidebooks will give different habitats for the giant puffball, but I personally think that it grows where it likes. I've found them on muddy lake banks that are covered in water for two months of most years, I've picked it from a pile of waste soil next to a rugby pitch, and I've found a ring of a dozen football sized puffballs in a patch of scrubby woodland by a railway track. The only linking thing I can find is that the soil must be relatively undisturbed for a few years. I can't really offer definitive advice on what habitat it prefers, but I will stick my neck out and say that sooner or later, if you keep your eyes open, you'll find one.

Can't easily be misidentified, unless you find a football in the woods.

4. The Pink Cracking Boletus (*Boletus chrysenteron*) and company…

Of all of the species covered in all of the 'top ten' articles for the whole year, this one is likely to be the most surprising to other foragers. It isn't the tastiest Boletus, that honour falls to the fabulously tasty penny bun or cep, *B. edulis*. Nor is it even one that is highly sought after, being largely overlooked by most pickers. But it is edible, and if you know how to use it, it is useful addition to your repertoire.

The pink cracking boletus is an exceptionally common mushroom. Like other species of Boletus, it is mycorrhizal, growing in association with certain trees (this one has a preference for broad leaved trees, I find oak to be one of its favourites). You'll find it in parks, woodlands, anywhere with a bit of grass around a few trees, all through later summer and into autumn. Its pores are yellowish, bruising green, and the flesh bruises very slowly blue.

It is, as ever, imperative to avoid confusion with other species, but the identification of boletes is a lot less fraught than it might appear; according to Mabey, in his seminal work 'Food for Free', all of the Boletus in Britain that are poisonous have red or purple on the stem or the pores.

When you find your *B. chrysenteron*, I recommend drying it; all of the boletes benefit from the drying process, which

intensifies their flavour. It's a bit squidgy when fresh, so use it in recipes that don't lose out from that; it makes a tasty, if slightly green pate.

5.Plum (*Prunus domestica*)

I mentioned cherry plum last month, but it is from August to October that the bulk of the true plums, *P. domestica*, start ripening.

It's an oft lamented fact that many of our hedgerows in Britain have been lost over the years, but if you can find any half decent hedges, have a good peek at the trees in them at this time of year. The hedgerow didn't merely act as a boundary or a barrier to keep stock in (or out), it was also a haven for wildlife, and a place to plant interesting and useful trees. And among those trees, the plum was always common, so you may find all manner of interesting and unusual varieties of plums in hedges.

But the source of wild plum trees doesn't stop there; people have been growing plums (including damsons and greengage) for generations, so you'll find them in grown out gardens, abandoned orchards, and as self seeded wild trees all over the country.

In some years the scale of the wild plum harvest can be almost burdensome, but you can take advantage of that by making some of the old fashioned plum recipes that require more fruit than you might normally be willing to buy. Plums make a great wine, they make unsurpassed jam (especially damsons), and they are a good basis for chutney. Soak them in brandy with a little sugar to preserve them (and to make a rather potent sweet liqueur), stew them down for the freezer, or even try some more exotic dishes; wild rabbit stewed with damsons takes a lot of beating.

6.Fat Hen (*Chenopodium album*)

Fat hen is an unsung hero of wild food. By this time of year, many specimens are monstrous great things, covered in leaves and flower heads. 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. Unlike all of the other wild leaves you CAN cook like spinach, these ones are better than spinach! Or if you prefer, eat them 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.

7.Blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus*)

I'm sure that many of us have fond memories of picking blackberries as children, but as adults few people seem to share the excitement of gathering the juicy, sweet, staining berries. I don't know whether it's the associated scratches inflicted by the savage thorns, or whether it's just that most adults are bone idle but however you look at it this is a mammoth harvest that you'd have to be a fool to miss out on. If you pick one wild species, if you only ever forage for one thing, you could do no better than the blackberry.

On a good morning, you might pick a good stone of blackberries. The first ones of the year (appearing July to September, depending where you are) are the juiciest and sweetest. They grow practically anywhere. They're the ones at the end of the shoots, and they're the ones you want for desserts. They can vary quite tremendously in quality and flavour, so if you find a patch you like make a mental note to keep coming back year after year, or take a cutting into cultivation.

Blackberries make a superb jam, a fine wine (on their own or combined with elderberries), they combine well with apples in pies and crumbles, they can be used in summer and autumn puddings, in fact they are incredibly versatile. My own favourite is double blackberry ripple ice cream, with some extra blackberries frozen on top.

8. Apple (*Malus sylvestris*)

We've been eating apples and tossing the cores away in Britain for centuries, and of course the unattended seeds have been growing away quite happily to produce an incalculable number of varieties of apple; some cultivated, some not cultivated. As apples don't grow true to type from seed, the apples in the wild are something of a mixed bag; the sheer, staggering variation between apple trees you'll find growing wild is amazing. You'll find small, hard, bullet like fruit that taste of battery acid (wild crab apples), slightly bigger unappetising ones, tiny little red ones that go pink all the way through, elongated yellow ones, big shiny red ones, watery green cooking apples… And if you open your eyes and really, really look you can find them almost anywhere. Old railway embankments provide exceptionally rich pickings, as do old parks, hedgerows, any patch of waste land that's been left alone for a few years, etc.

Even the most sour crab apples can be used in wine, or stewed down for making fruit jellies and jams set. But make sure you give them a tentative taste, you never know just how sweet the apples from any one tree may be till you try them. Expect to find ripe apples in the wild from August until there's a hard frost.

9. Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*)

I'm including the rowan in this list for one reason, and one reason alone. Rowan jelly, one of the finest and most useful preserves you can have in stock. Basically, it's a jelly made the old fashioned way; boil three parts by weight rowan berries with two parts apples (use at least a couple of kilos of fruit to make it worthwhile), with enough water to half cover it, until it is a pulp. Strain this through a jelly bag, let it drip for a day or so, and then boil the juice with sugar (a pound of sugar per pint of juice) till setting point is reached, and bottle the jelly in sterile jam jars.

This preserve is good with bread and cheese, it's superb with game, a glob of it added to a gravy will enrich it; in short, it is an invaluable thing to have in…

You can also make wine from the berries, and although it's a fine tasting wine eventually it's not one to make till you have a good cellar of other country wines built up; it is slow to mature and not good until it is at least six months (preferably two years!) old.

The berries are inedible raw, and they are ripe when they turn a deep orange/red colour. In some regions (especially the North, Wales and Scotland) the tree is very common and fruits prolifically; you may struggle to find enough berries to do anything meaningful with in some parts of the South East and East Anglia. If you find only a few, leave them for the birds, but if you must take some home try boiling them with some gravy from a joint, sweetening with a sprinkle of sugar to offset the bitterness. Take them out before serving; you won't be disappointed by the flavour.

10. Parasols, and shaggy parasols (*Lepiota procera* and *Lepiota rhacodes*)

This month's wild card; some years I find hundreds of parasols in August, in others I have to wait till September or even October before the weather turns wet enough for parasols.

While this is a princely mushroom (taller than the grass they're growing up through, up to a foot across on slender looking stalks) a word of caution is necessary here. Firstly, be extra careful with any mushroom that has white gills and a ring; there are a lot of really nasty ones out there (many of the *Amanitas*) that fit this description. Secondly, once you're sure you've identified your parasols, be sure that you eat them sparingly to begin with. While not poisonous, some people find parasols really indigestible, so take it easy till you know you're not one of them.

Get past that, and you're in for a treat. This mushroom does well in pasture land, light woods, and can fruit most

prolifically. You'll find it in rings most often, and you're almost as likely to find ten as you are to find one or two. It's good in all sorts of mushroom dishes, and when sliced it dries very well. The shape of the younger specimens makes them good candidates for stuffing, while as they age they become good as fritters, dipped in egg and bread crumbs before frying.