

Wild Foods in September

Contributed by cab

September's changeable weather offers a wealth of surprises for the forager. A miscellany of mushrooms might be accompanied by some late greens as well as a very good chance of harvesting wild fruits that will make a good brew to accompany future hauls.

Indian Summer or Early Autumn, you never really know what September will bring till it comes. Will it rain steadily for 30 days or might the sun dominate through till October? Either way, you're going to be able to exploit a wide range of wild foods this month, perhaps a wider range than any other.

This is the month when the mushroom takes starring role. There are dozens, if not hundreds of species of mushroom to pick in a good September, and it is extremely hard to limit myself to a few. So forgive me if this month's pick of my favourite wild species is very much dominated by fungi.

But despite rather fungal bias, there are some cracking greens to be had in September. If it's mild, you'll find fresh growth of hogweed, cow parsley, chickweed and ground elder, and you'll also see the annual brassicaceae such as garlic mustard and rape throwing up tender green growth.

Horse Mushrooms, Field mushrooms, etc. (edible species of agaricus)

These chaps headed my list for last month (August) too. Let me tell you a secret; while mushrooming snobs will wax lyrical about ceps, chanterelles, morels and suchlike, deep down they all know that the humble is as good as if not better than any of them. There's some more detail on in the August article; here I've restricted myself to two, the horse mushroom and the field mushroom. For their other tasty relatives, see that article instead.

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

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.

Whereas the field mushroom is, in flavour, like a shop bought mushroom, you'll find that the horse mushroom is somewhat different; slightly almondy, almost meaty, and very enjoyable. It makes an excellent mushroom pate, and if you have a few of them mixed with other wild mushrooms (I suggest some puffball and some boletus) then you can make one of the finest risottos you'll ever have.

The main bad guy here is the yellow stainer, . 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!

Hazel Nuts (*Coryllus avellana*)

I'm a big fan of hazel nuts, but I rarely seem to beat the squirrels to the ripe ones. The trick is to acquire a taste for nuts that are slightly under-ripe, learn to like them at a stage before the squirrels do, when they're young, sweet, almost milky, and you can enjoy as many as you like.

You normally see them from July onwards, but they're probably peaking in September. While domestic hazelnuts (or cobnuts) come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, wild hazelnuts look most like the common or garden hazelnut you'll see at the supermarket, only smaller, greener, paler.

Hazel trees don't tend to be huge, the furry leaves are a giveaway though, you'll spot them at any time of the year. And they're 'sticky', producing many long, sappy shoots so they lend themselves to being coppiced, and as often as not the hazels you'll find are old coppiced trees. They're found in woods, hedgerows, overgrown parks and suchlike, and you oughtn't have too much trouble finding them.

Hazel trees are springy, so be prepared to bend boughs down to get to the nuts. Be gentle though. More than once I've snapped a hazel branch into my own face!

Use them as you would any hazelnuts, but to be honest I think they're best just broken into and munched in the field.

Giant Puffball (*Langermannia gigantea*)

This is another I introduced last month, but I've always found the monsters, the truly ginormous puffballs, in September and October. And there is nothing more exciting for any forager than to unexpectedly encounter a monster puffball!

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 maniacally 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.

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, 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 , 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 in Britain that are poisonous have red or purple on the stem or the pores.

When you find your , 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.

Damson (*Prunus domestica*)

I mentioned cherry plum in July, the true plum last month, but now it is the damson that takes centre stage.

The damson is basically a small, acidic, dark skinned, uninviting looking plum. But just sometimes, the best things come in small packages, and in this case that is undoubtedly true. The damson may not seem that encouraging to eat raw (although I would urge you to let some ripen and eat them that way), but careful cooking with just a little sugar transforms the damson into the most flavoursome fruit you can possibly imagine. Indeed it is the damson that makes the best jam of all of the plums, makes the best wine (a hauntingly flavoured dark red wine, I make a gallon very sweet with seven pounds of damsons and five pounds of sugar every year) and an unbeatable crumble. Or try adding a handful of stoned damsons to rabbit stew, or dice some up and throw them in gravy as you cook it… They're a marvellous fruit to use.

Gnarled old damson trees are to be found in all sorts of places; it is a hedgerow favourite, its found by river banks (I know of a whole grow out orchard by a river in the Midlands), waste ground, railway banks, etc.

Blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus*)

Another stalwart of the wild kitchen, I've been recommending the blackberry for months.

If you haven't been out looking yet, and it's already September, go out, go now, and pick some. Really. Because there'll be frosts soon and you'll kick yourself for missing the bounty.

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.

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.

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 () 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 pastureland, 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.

Shaggy Cap (*Coprinus comatus*)

I'm including this one here because I've always had my best hauls of shaggy cap mushrooms in September, but keep your eye open for it at other times, from mid summer till autumn. I used to pick this one by the bucketload when I lived in Nottingham, by the hatload on Tyneside, but here in Cambridge I'm happy with one or

two. A bit of rain brings it out, and it'll reappear on the same field over and over again.

This is a 'here today, gone tomorrow' mushroom, in that it's an ink cap, so its shelf life is very, very short. It's always going to try to turn black and inky, as that's how it releases its spores. This is also why, as a wild mushroom, it commands an immense price in Japan (the time to get it to market is so very, very short). But on the flip side, that very softness makes it a great treat, and the short lived nature of the beast means that it is extremely unlikely that your prized specimens will be infested with maggots. You might have to flick the odd earwig out of them, though.

Cook it in soups and stews, and it more or less disappears. But the delicate flavour it imparts will more than compensate for its lack of mass. It's also a good one in an omelette, or even just lightly fried with scrambled eggs.

This mushroom looks rather like a shaggy white guards hat. You'll find it all over waste land, sports fields, pastures, parks, basically wherever the grass gets a bit of a beating and regular water, you have a fighting chance of finding it.

Can be confused with the common ink cap, *Coprinus atramentarius*, a dirty grey coloured ink cap, quite different to the common ink cap in that respect, and capable of making you quite ill if you have alcohol a day either side of eating it, and the magpie ink cap (*Coprinus picaeus*), which is only white when young, changing to greyish black quite quickly.

Fairy Ring Mushroom (*Marasmius oreades*)

I introduced this one way, way back in May, and it is one that you might have been picking on and off all summer. I'm mentioning it again now because it is in September, with the early autumn rain and cooler climate, that this mushroom usually produces its fullest, most prolific growth. And now is the perfect time to get out there and pick it, and dry it for Christmas; a jar of dried wild mushrooms makes an excellent gift.

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 isn't so 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 generally I pick them after rain in May and September, when there tend to be less maggot holes in them..

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.

Found one of these wild foods and want some reassurance or just to share the excitement? Get yourself on to the Foraging board on the Downsizer.net forum