

Top Ten Wild Foods by Fresh Water

Contributed by cab

A walk by the riverside can yield lunch as well as food for the soul, explains Cab in his pick of wild foods in wet places.

Many of the best walks to be had are alongside waterways, be they canals, rivers, filled in gravel pits or lakes. One of the best things about such habitats in the last 20 years is that, for the most part, they have become cleaner than any time in the preceding half century. And that, for the forager, is great news. What follows is a taster of some of the species of plant and fungi that are amongst the most plentiful and tasty that you will find on your walks in wet places.

I have taken the liberty of excluding some of the more common edible waterside plants that I think are pointless. The marsh thistle, for example, is common enough in some areas, but to prepare it is a lot of work and, in my opinion, not worth the effort. Bistort, red leg and related plants are all edible spring greens, but rather lacking in flavour.

(1) Watercress (*Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum*)

Yes, this is the same watercress that you buy in shops for a lot of money for a really small bunch. If you can spot it wild it's free, so you can make watercress soup, you can cook it as a green, etc. Serve it cooked and mashed in potatoes, with boiled bacon, and you've got a homely meal but one fit for a king. Pick it from moving water (a ditch with a really good flow will do), and take the top, mature shoots only to avoid damaging the root. The only real danger is that you must be very, very careful to cook any watercress that comes from a water course where there are animals grazing upstream; the danger of liver flukes is quite real. I personally always cook wild watercress to make absolutely sure. Really, you can expect to find it growing abundantly any time from the middle of February onwards; it's at its best as soon as you can find it, until it starts flowering.

(2) Coltsfoot (*Tussilago farfara*)

Don't go looking for the colts foot shaped leaves of this plant early in Spring, you won't find many of them until after the flowers have been and gone, the unusual habit of this plant is that it doesn't produce any leaves (the shape of which give the plant its name) until after it has flowered.

When you find coltsfoot, in old gravel pits, by rivers, by lakes and the like you might just find loads. Huge swathes of golden yellow flowers by the water, taking up the slack when the daffodils of early Spring are dying off. And when you do it's a really handy flower to have. Herbally (I don't go in for herbalism much, except in cases like this where it really, really works) it's a potent anti-tussive, so it's handy to keep some dried for making a herb tea to stop you coughing so much if you get a cold. But I prefer a more direct approach; I soak them in vodka (with cloves) to achieve a similar thing.

They make a cracking wine, and they're also really pleasant in salads. They look and taste great. Later in the year, the leaves make an 'interesting' green vegetable. Not to my tastes, but some foragers love them.

(3) Cuckoo Flower (*Cardamine pratensis*)

This is my favourite wild flower. It's the only thing that can, for me, trump wild violets (which I also adore). I can't really say why, it's a fairly unassuming little brassica, but the colour of its little pinkish purple flowers, and the little spears of them that appear over fenland, by river banks and lakes all over the UK between March and May I find totally charming. There's a lot of variation in the flower colour; purply-pink through to white, but they're all quite enchanting.

There's not a lot to this plant, a little rosette of leaves and a flower stem in the mud. But do try eating it; the flowers are so pretty in a salad, and the leaves are surprisingly hot and pungent. Not one to eat on its own, but blended with other leaves it is most tasty.

(4) Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*)

Perhaps the most common 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.

(5) Chicken of the Woods (*Laetiporus sulphureus*)

Another of my favourites, one I've found first in May every year for the past six. It's an odd looking critter; bright yellow, tiny pores on the underside, bright orange on top, and it grows in thumping great clumps of brackets on the side of dead (and live) trees and stumps. And if you find some, you might easily find five or ten kilos. I'm including it here because one of its favourite habitats is willow, and that tree is found on river banks across most of the country (and wet areas like this are sadly neglected by most mushroom hunters, who rely on field guides detailing what you find in woodlands, meaning they remain unaware of richer pickings elsewhere).

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.

(6) 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, garlicky spring onions. It is by water, and in some damp woods, where this plant really thrives; there are many riverbanks completely dominated by wild garlic.

You can pick the bulbs and use them, but I'll 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 butter, stuff it under chicken skin when roasting, blend it into potato soup, etc.

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.

(7) Common Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*)

This is a thumping great big perennial plant, it's over a meter tall at its best, with big, sprawling green leaves. Now it is often thought of as the best friend of allotment holders and gardeners, because its leaves compost down very quickly and are used to line potato trenches, to activate compost heaps, etc. On the down side, it is also a complete bully of a plant, and it can soon outgrow its patch. But in the wild you'll find it most often by rivers, where you can easily pick plenty of leaves to eat right through summer. Like most wild edible greens, you can cook it down like spinach, but I think that's a waste, it is far better dipped in batter and fried, for simple, tasty, comfrey fritters. A word of warning also; comfrey is tasty, but not everyone gets on with it, and in large quantities it may yet turn out to be toxic (the jury is rather out on this one, some people with liver conditions really can't cope with it, others seem to eat it happily for years). So for the moment, eat it sparingly, don't feed it to young children or pregnant women, or anyone who has liver problems.

(8) Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*)

You find this flowering in high summer, through July and August, great frothy masses of white flowers by riversides. The smell is intense, sort of medicinal, sort of sweet, and therein lie the clues to the uses for this plant.

The name isn't derived from meadows and the sweet aroma, it is derived from the Middle Ages use of this plant for sweetening mead. The exact recipe for this I don't know, but I have made mead flavoured with meadowsweet, and the result was surprising, you really need very little meadowsweet to get a very much sweetened flavour. Too much and the taste is intensely medicinal.

The other common use for this is as a very mild painkiller, because the plant contains a certain amount of salicylin, better known as aspirin. Chew a few leaves as you walk along, and you can certainly keep a mild ache at bay.

You can also use leaves and flowers from the plant to flavour soft drinks. Try some of the flowers in lemonade.

(9) Raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*)

I've found more raspberries growing on the shores of Scottish lochs than anywhere else. They seem to thrive in such locations, ripening earlier in the reflected sunlight. I've seen them growing in Lochalsh, Aberdeen, Inverness, Glasgow, on the shores of Loch Lomond, in mountain valleys on Skye… And in England they seem to do well on the banks of many rivers. They seem to love such locations.

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 blackberry), look out for chinese bramble (*R. tricolor*), salmonberry (*R. spectabilis*, which more or less monopolises the wet ground of Stornoway park) and garden escapees of the various hybrids like tayberry, loganberry, etc; I've seen all of these prolifically in the wild. Don't waste time looking for the rare and disappointing cloudberry in the UK; too rare, too bland.

(10) *Agrocybe cylindracea*

Most of the wild mushroom books that even mention this species list it as being rare. I've never come across a guide to edible wild mushrooms that even mentions it. And in all honesty, it isn't the most widely spread wild mushroom. But when you do find it, you are likely to find so very much of it. The secret is to look for old willows, such as you find lining river banks across East Anglia and much of the rest of the South of England, and it is on the roots of such trees that you find this mushroom growing. Most mushroom hunters restrict themselves to woodlands, and that means that the forager looking on riverbanks has no competition.

It is a mushroom with a good, solid texture, a little bit of crunch to it unless you really cook it. So make the most of that by cooking it in Chinese recipes, where it can be used in place of shitake. It dries only passably well, so pick only enough for your immediate use rather than picking to stock up your winter stocks.

You can find this mushroom almost any time of the year, but you are most likely to find it from late summer, and it often turns up after a frost.

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