

Top Ten Wild Foods at the Seaside

Contributed by cab

Nearly all of the places you'll go foraging are rather similar in some ways; you're looking for wild fruits, mushrooms, a few greens and edible wild flowers, etc. But when you get to the coast, the range of possible quarry for a forager expands massively. You're not only looking for all of the same things that you find inland, you're exploring a whole new set of habitats that have a diversity of foodstuffs that is entirely different to what you'll find elsewhere; shellfish, seaweed, coastal plants, a whole new array of flavours and textures to explore.

Whole books can (and indeed have been) written on the subject of seashore foraging. This short guide does not attempt to replace any of them, and I make no claims as to it being exhaustive. Indeed, many of my own favourite forages, such as the oyster and the shore crab, are not included here. I have instead chosen ten that are common, easy to identify, simple to find and easy to prepare. I have also excluded two exceptionally good vegetables that are becoming rather scarce; eryngoes and sea kale, both capital eating, but rather less common in some areas than they once were. Also excluded are those mushrooms that do well near the coast, but for the record, check out *Agaricus bernardii*. All of them are likely to be found above the low tide mark, somewhere in the transition from sea to land, be it in the rockpools, on the beach, or up on the dunes and the cliffs.

A Quick Note on Safety It does, of course, go without saying that you have to be absolutely sure of the identity of any wild food you are about to eat. But I'm saying it anyway; don't make me regret writing this by poisoning yourself with something you didn't identify properly.

There are further risks to seaside foraging that you don't very often encounter inland. The first one, the one that you're most likely to run foul of, is cleanliness. On our congested little island we have managed to make lots of our beaches somewhat toxic; before gathering shellfish consult with the Environment Agency to make sure that your proposed foraging grounds are clean and safe. Failing that, at the very least talk with the locals to find out where is safe. Remember that while shellfish are at their best in winter (or any month with an r in it, as they say), you CAN eat them in summer; the quality during the summer months, when they are spawning, is much reduced. The second risk is the sea itself. You may scoff at this, but it is VERY easy to be trapped by rising tides or, worse, caught up in quicksand. If there are signs warning about quicksand or treacherous tides, take note. Don't get drowned, don't get cocky. Take a compass with you down to the beach to find your way home through a sea mist, and make sure you're not still there as the tide comes trundling in around you. The final risk I'll warn you of is cliffs; now this may seem obvious, but if the forage you are after is growing on or near a cliff top (and this often happens, due to the lack of grazing on the cliff itself) then leave it be. It isn't worth it, no matter how good the forage looks.

(1) Marsh Samphire (also known as glasswort), . This is a funny looking plant. You find it in mud flats and coastal salt marshes around much of the South of the British Isles, being less common up in Scotland. I guess you'd call it something of a 'succulent', having a soft, green water filled body and no leaves as such. It is now commonly sold in fishmongers and on farmers markets, one of the few really wild vegetables for sale, and it is all the rage in some of the posh restaurants where it fetches a silly price, which is amusing if you know where to pick it for free. Get your wellies on if you're looking for this one. It's a dirty job. Pick the young plants whole in July, ideally, but its edible well into August and sometimes into September. Wash them well, steam them lightly, toss in a little butter, and pick them up by the roots and bite off the soft growth. Eat it as fresh as you can and you won't be disappointed. As it ages, it gets a hard, wiry heart, which isn't the end of the world, just chew the plant off that.

(2) Sea Beet, . If I lived close to the sea, almost anywhere in the UK, then I wouldn't grow spinach or chard in my garden, I'd rely on this superb wild vegetable. It grows profusely on cliffs and by dunes near the sea, and it tastes just like spinach, only sometimes it is slightly salty. It is, in fact, the wild relative of spinach, and you can sometimes spot that there's been some hybridisation (you find some wild cultivars that have bigger leaves, odd colouration, etc). And to be honest you can use it like spinach; try the leaves raw first, find out whether the specimen is good enough for salad, but if it isn't then it'll cook as well as spinach.

(3) Alexanders, Alexanders are one of the umbellifers we can thank the Romans for introducing, they brought it over as a green vegetable, and a superb one it is too. Find it around the coast of much of Britain (being especially common from Anglesey, down and around all the way to Norfolk, sporadically further North on the East Coast being plentiful in places like Scarborough), and also inland by some roadsides and some waste places, where it can almost inexplicably grow to the exclusion of everything else (for example, I know a place in Cambridge where it smothers out nearly everything else). Pick the young stems and steam them gently, perhaps coating in butter when they're done. Or chop them and add them with stock vegetables in a stew, and they'll impart a delicate, herby flavour unlike anything else. I personally like to use them to flavour seafood dishes; try adding the chopped leaves to moules mariniere, or dressing crab salads with them. Like any umbellifer, you could do yourself serious harm if you were to mistake one of the poisonous wild relatives of alexanders for the real thing. But don't let that worry you too much, once you get to know the texture and smell you'll have no trouble knowing the real thing. Pick it before it flowers if you can; if you miss it in Spring, go looking again in Autumn when it starts growing again to flower next Spring.

(4) Limpet, The poor old limpet isn't rated as a food by most people, and I can see why. They're tough, hard to pry off the rocks, and take some cooking to make them good, but on the flip side they're plentiful, tasty, and very easy to identify! The key to limpet hunting is stealth. You may laugh at this, but once a limpet knows you are there then there's no shifting him. Don't try a gentle tap to remove him, all you'll achieve is that he will grip the rock more tightly, and unless you actually smash his shell (ruining the limpet for nothing) then he's staying where he is. One firm strike at an unsuspecting limpet with the butt of a knife or a small rock is all that is needed. Don't try to pry one off with a knife, I tried that once and the end broke off! When you've got your limpets, you'll see that they're basically snails. There are two good ways of cooking limpets. Either plunge them into boiling water

for 5 minutes, extract them from their shells, and then fry with some garlic and herbs (I like alexanders and wild garlic for this), or put them on the rack of a warm barbecue, shell side down, and poach them in their own juices with just a drop of lemon juice. The latter produces a surprisingly tasty and tender morsel of food. The limpets head is rather hard, so you might find limpets go down better if you cut the hard part off after the initial boiling. (5) Winkles, This is one of my favourite seaside forages. I think that this comes from happy childhood memories of gathering winkles in the rockpools just outside of Seahouses in Northumberland, and then boiling them for a short while in salty water before sitting and eating them by the sea, armed with a trusty pin to work the unlikely, snotlike snails from their shells. And in all honesty, that's as good as it gets with winkles. You're not going to fill your belly with them in a hurry, but they are tasty and fun little things to eat, and if you've got a good patch then you can pick plenty. Never empty a whole pool of them, but rather take a few from lots of different pools; leave plenty of breeding stock. Common throughout the British Isles, these little grey-black sea-snails are found in rockpools in the littoral, tidal zone (the clue is in the scientific name!) pretty universally. I cook them for 12-15 minutes in boiling salted water, dress them with a little more salt and vinegar, then sit and wrinkle them out; you get a pin, flick off the little hard shield, and then carefully twist and pry the meat out. Takes some getting used to, but it's well worth it. Pop it straight into your mouth (or save it for a more complex recipe if you prefer), and ideally, throw the shell over your shoulder and into the sea, enjoying the view from the harbour wall… (6) Musse, Not my favourite shellfish, but perhaps the tastiest, having a flavour that can rival the oyster and even the best scallops. And really very common, if you have a good spot to go forage on. Best picked from rocky shorelines, and it is extremely important that the shore be clean; really, check this out with the Environment Agency if you are in any way unsure. Once you have your mussels, put them in a bucket of salty water with some oats, and leave them overnight. This frees up a lot of the grit that might be in them and somewhat cleans and purges them. Take each one, tap it to make sure it stays closed (if it isn't closed chuck it, it's dead and therefore unsafe), scrape off any barnacles, pull out the byssus (the hairs that hold the mussels together and to the rocks) and they're ready for cooking. Cook them just as you would for bought ones, but in the spirit of happy foraging, try combining them with other wild ingredients. Moules mariniere flavoured with cow parsley and sorrel works well, and a wild herb soup with mussels is one of the best things you will ever taste. (7) Bladder Wrack, Yes, this is the ranky seaweed with little air holes on it that makes it float up. It isn't the tastiest seaweed, but it's the most common, and it has a pleasant, salty, inoffensive flavour. It's a good beginners seaweed for all of those reasons; give it a go, it'll surprise you. Pick it in Spring, when it is starting to throw up softer growth. Don't gather the nasty stuff that has broken away on its own, pick it when it is still moist and attached to the rocks, and only pick the softer stuff, leaving the old, tough fronds behind. I like to chew little bits on the beach, just as it is, but most people think it's insane for that, it's far too salty. For your first seaweed recipe, can I suggest using it in a simple fish stew. Take your bladderwrack and soak it for a couple of hours in clean water, then add it to the stock you're going to use and boil it for half an hour. Remove it from the stock, and you've imparted a subtle, salty, seaweedy flavour and a kind of slightly thick, almost slightly glutinous texture. Give it a shot. (8) Sea Lettuce, Looks like lettuce leaves, a green and leafy seaweed found between the low and high tide marks all round Britain. I would guess that from talking about eating seaweed with some French friends that this is the one that our neighbours over the channel esteem most. Really, the leaves are very lettucey in shape. I recommend a recipe I've adapted from Roger Phillips wild food book, pick them fresh from the rocks, soak in tap water for half an hour, and cook lightly in butter for three minutes before dressing with olive oil, vinegar, pepper and lemon juice. Garnish with chopped spring onions, and you have the nicest hot seaweed salad you'll ever encounter. Or try marinating in soy sauce, rice wine and vinegar for an oriental salad, goes very well with oily fish. You can also mix sea lettuce with its better known culinary relative, laver. (9) Sweet Oar Weed, This is kind of brownish green, with straight but frilly fronds up to 3m long. You need to get your waders on for this one, you find it right at the low tide mark, extending into the sea. Pick it in spring, when it is at its best. This is the one you want to pick for real crispy fried seaweed. The stuff you normally get in Chinese restaurants is cabbage, and that's nice, but it isn't a patch on real fried seaweed. This is another recipe adapted from Phillips. Gather a frond or two, hang them in a warm place until kind of dry and leathery; you aren't looking at totally dried out here, but you want it dry to the touch. Cut it into squares about 1-2cm across, and drop the squares a few at a time into hot (not boiling) fat, taking great care because they do spit terribly. They will quickly expand and go crispy. They will need no salting, but a little pepper does no harm. Kind of like seaweed crisps, and surprisingly sweet. (10) Laver, This is rather like sea lettuce, but much darker, almost black, kind of purplish sometimes. In truth, you're likely to pick a wide variety of very similar species, but it barely matters, they mix together just fine. A traditional foodstuff in some parts of Wales, I'd go so far as to call it an 'acquired taste'. But if you find some, try cooking it to a puree (takes a while; an hour or more sometimes), and keep in the freezer till breakfast time. Then heat it in a pan, spread it on toast, and serve with bacon. Well, that's the theory. Personally, I'd rather add it into my miso soup (a Japanese favourite) for texture, in which I think it is exquisite, but perhaps I'm still waiting for the ideal Welsh laver experience. If you have any questions or suggestions about seaside foraging please post them in the forum.