

Top Ten Wild Foods to Gather in Winter

Contributed by cab

As the nights start to draw in, and the barren trees bear testimony to the changing season, it could be easy to assume that there's nothing left growing wild for foragers to concern themselves with. While winter is certainly our least bounteous season, there are still many interesting plants and fungi to go looking for. And while looking for what should be growing in winter, don't be blinded to what really is growing, as in our mild winters of recent years there have been many treats, especially mushrooms, that have done well far later in the season than the guide books will have you believe.

What follows is a 'top ten' of species that I tend to pick in winter. I hope that after reading this, on your next frosty walk you'll keep your eye open for some of these plants and fungi, and that you'll learn to appreciate these winter gems as much as I do. This isn't meant as an identification guide in itself, and you must ensure that you check out what you've picked with someone who really knows what they're doing (assuming you don't!) before eating.

(1) Oyster mushrooms (*Pleurotus ostreatus*, *Pleurotus cornucopiae*)

These are the real gems of any winter forage. Go looking for them at any time during the year, they're genuinely in season all of the time, but they're often at their best right in the middle of winter! Look for them after a frost; anything from two days to a week after a hard frost, if the weather has been a little more temperate, you can expect to find oyster mushrooms fruiting. The 'cold shock' synchronises many strains of *Pleurotus* to start fruiting at the same time, and a canny forager can use that to his advantage. Use wild oyster mushrooms in just the same way as shop bought ones; they're a tasty, textured mushroom suited to stir frying, stews and soups. Find them on dead and decaying wood, in forests and parks throughout the British Isles. Pictures at:

http://botit.botany.wisc.edu/toms_fungi/oct98.html

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/R155602.HTM>

(2) Blewits (*Lepista nuda*, *Lepista irina*)

Genuine heavyweights of wild mushroom picking, blewits are in my opinion amongst the very tastiest things you'll ever find in the wild. Intensely flavoured, and found anywhere there's grass, a few trees, and a bit of moisture, they can be picked right through the winter, typically from October through to January.

It's very important to cook them, they don't agree with some people when eaten raw, but they're amongst the easiest of wild mushrooms to find and identify.

Pictures at:

http://home.wanadoo.nl/abiemans/e_lep_saev.html

[\(3\) Nettle \(*Urtica dioica*\)](http://www.agarics.org/...jsp?recordName=Blue%20Leg%20(Field%20Blewit))

I know what you're thinking. Nettles? In Winter? Those unappealing dried up stems?

That isn't what I'm talking about, of course. Look more closely at the clumps of stinging nettle, and you may be pleasantly surprised to see new, fresh growth at and near the base. It will be intensely green, soft (still stingy!) and lush, and it makes capital eating.

Gather your nettles with care; wear gloves when picking and preparing them or you'll regret it. Wash them, removing any bits of old stem or any tough material, and then cook them through rather like spinach, adding a little nutmeg. Or use them in soup. They're tasty, and very nutritious.

Pictures at:

<http://www.plant-identification.co.uk/skye/urticaceae/urtica-dioecia.htm>

[\(4\) Chickweed \(*Stellaria media*\)](http://linnaeus.nrm.se/flora/di/urtica/urtic/urtidio4.jpg)

This is one of my favourite greens, and it can be found poking around the edge of fields, vegetable patches, pretty much anywhere there's disturbed ground. Its little white flowers and tiny little green leaves belie the fact that this plant has a superb, succulent texture and a flavour not unlike a cross between cress and spinach.

I eat this one raw, in salads, more or less all year; it is of course especially useful in winter when there is so little else

around. Mixed with some lettuce and sorrel, it's a great ingredient in a winter salad.

Pictures at:

http://www.esb.utexas.edu/mbierner/bio406d/images/pics/car/stellaria_media.htm

[http://www.kulak.ac.be/facult/wet/biologie/pb/kulakbiocampus/lage%20planten/Stellaria%20media%20-%20Vogelmuur/vogelmuur.htm\(5\)](http://www.kulak.ac.be/facult/wet/biologie/pb/kulakbiocampus/lage%20planten/Stellaria%20media%20-%20Vogelmuur/vogelmuur.htm(5)) Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinalis*)

We all know the humble dandelion. Many people seem obsessed with eradicating it from their lawns and flower beds, but for me it's a welcome visitor. It's a tasty, productive, and versatile little weed.

In Winter, you won't find many flowers (although keep your eye open and likely as not you'll find it flowering at any time), but you'll find plenty of leaves. And this is also the time to dig up the roots.

The leaves will be a little bitter; mix them in with some good lettuce and sorrel in a salad, and make sure that you sample your dandelion leaves before serving, just to make sure you haven't picked any really nasty ones. Serve the leaf salad with croutons and crispy fried slithers of bacon, and you've got a filling little side dish.

Dig roots up in early winter, and give them a good clean. Then you can dry them out in an oven, grind them up and roast them for dandelion coffee (tastes just like French coffee with chicory, pre-sweetened and kind of milky; not to my tastes, but a handy caffeine free drink nonetheless). Alternatively you can fry them in chunks in a little oil, add some soy sauce, and cook down till softened.

Pictures at:

<http://online-media.uni-marburg.de/biologie/botex/quiz/0042.html>

http://www.florelixir.net/html_photo/taraxacum%20officinalis.html

(6) Rose (*Rosa canina* and related species)

Rose hips start ripening in Summer, and through Autumn and into Winter you'll find them slowly bletting (softening due to the release of enzymes by the fruit itself) on the bushes. They're a superbly versatile fruit that is much under-utilised, I suspect due to the traumatization of an entire generation with awful, sickly sweet rose hip syrup.

Any quick web search will reveal dozens of recipes for rose hips. From the infamous syrup, through to jellies, jams, and puddings all the way to some savoury favourites of mine such as rose hip soup. Dried they make a fine herbal tea.

Just make sure that in whatever you cook, you get rid of the seeds. Normally that's achieved by cooking to a pulp and straining, but make absolutely sure of not crushing them when doing so as that imparts a rather unpleasant, bitter tang to the finished dish.

Pictures at:

<http://www.waldhang.de/0109038b.html>

[http://www.pirineodearagon.com/flora/web_flora/frutos/paginas/rosa_canina.HTML\(7\)](http://www.pirineodearagon.com/flora/web_flora/frutos/paginas/rosa_canina.HTML(7)) Medlar (*Mespilus germanica*)

The medlar is a not uncommon little deciduous tree found in the Midlands and South of Britain, being a little bit less common further North. Its fruit is an unappetising looking thing, kind of dull green to brown, with pointy fronds on the end of it, all in all not something you'd expect to be good to eat. It doesn't even ripen properly in Britain.

The tree eventually gives up on its fruit. Some time around October or November the medlars start to soften on the tree, to 'blet', at which point they turn brown, pulpy, and sweet. Sort of like stewed pears. And all of a sudden they're delicious.

I like to eat them just as they are, squeezing the flesh out and leaving the skin, spitting the hard stones out as I eat them. But they also adapt well to pies and puddings. Picked earlier in the year before they blet, they make a super jelly, but for me that wastes what is otherwise a rare treat; a fruit that can be picked and eaten straight off the tree right through till December, in a good year.

Pictures at:

http://www.clivesimms.com/new_page_10%20medlar.htm

[http://www.boga.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/html/Mespilus_germanica_Foto2.html\(8\)](http://www.boga.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/html/Mespilus_germanica_Foto2.html(8)) Cow Parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*)

I love cow parsley. Common as muck, but dangerously similar to other wild, poisonous umbellifers, I wouldn't recommend picking it to anyone who isn't entirely confident in their ability to distinguish it from the water dropworts, rough chervil, and hemlock. But if you are up to it, it's a great wild plant.

It forms little crowns of leaves in winter, you'll find it even through the snow. It is the nearest wild relative of chervil, as you can tell by its flavour. It's a super addition to herb risottos, herb breads and green salads, and I also use it to flavour potato soup.

Pictures at:

<http://www.kulak.ac.be/facult/wet/biologie/pb/kulakbiocampus/lage%20planten/Anthriscus%20sylvestris%20-%20Fluitenkruid/fluitekruid.htm>http://honeybee.helsinki.fi/USERS/KORPELA/anthriscus_sylvestris.html

(9) Ground Elder (*Aegopodium podagraria*)

This is a weed. It's a really common, evil weed that is a nightmare to eradicate from your garden. It's a common feature of Radio 4's 'Gardeners Question Time' that panellists will discuss how exactly to eradicate it from a garden, and almost always the solution is to nuke it with glyphosate. I, however, would like to suggest a different solution. Eat it. With gusto. Sooner or later (probably later), if you keep taking the green leaves off it to eat, it'll die.

The Romans, who grew ground elder as a vegetable, introduced this weed along with several other wild umbellifers to the British Isles. Until the late middle ages it was found in vegetable and herb gardens all over the country, until the British decided that they really didn't like vegetables with flavour, when they inexplicably went off it.

And it is a superb green vegetable, but a sod to kill off. Use that to your advantage; pick the young greens throughout the year, making the plants throw more up, using the leaves in salad when they're young and soft, and cooking them like cabbage (steamed gently) as they age. Even into winter, you'll find them growing happily in woodlands and hedgerows, and as long as they haven't got too tough they make fine eating.

Pictures at:

<http://www.kulak.ac.be/facult/wet/biologie/pb/kulakbiocampus/lage%20planten/Aegopodium%20podagraria%20-%20Zevenblad/zevenblad.htm>

[http://www.waldhang.de/0106037.html\(10\)](http://www.waldhang.de/0106037.html(10)) Apple (*Malus* sp.)

You're familiar with crab apples, of course, and you all know what ordinary apples look like. But did you ever go looking for crab apple trees in winter? It's astonishing how long the fruit cling to the trees, sometimes persisting until the storms of January dissuade them from hugging on any longer.

The sheer variety of apples you'll find growing wild is staggering; from hard little balls of acid, right through to aromatic, sweet scented giants, you can find an astonishing array of apples growing wild, right into the winter.

And as long as they're intact, they'll be useful to you. Crab apples may be tart, but use that to your advantage. I like to stack them under a joint of pork, mashing them in the juices at the end with maybe a little brown sugar to make a great roast apple sauce. I soak them in gin, with sugar, to make a rather savage drink to take to parties. They add in with rose hips or rowans to make a jelly. Be creative and you'll find no end of uses for them.

Pictures at:

<http://www.growingnative.org.uk/crabapple.htm>

<http://www.somersite.co.uk/gallery/pages/crab-apples.htm>