

Top Ten Wild Foods in February

Contributed by Cab

It's a funny month is February. Frequently wintry, cold, wet and miserable, but the signs of approaching spring are all around if you know where to look for them. Garden birds are all pairing off and making an almighty racket, and for the first time in months the world is becoming a vibrant green again. Although we'd be kidding ourselves if we said that it's actually Spring, the growth spurt of wild plants that will go on to flower and produce seed in Summer has begun, and it's that young, succulent growth that can keep the forager happy until Springtime really gets going. It is with this in mind that I've compiled a list of my top ten February forages. Not a lot of mushrooms on this list; we're in the worst part of the year for mushrooming, I'm afraid, and no fruit either, but there is still a nut to be had for free if you're lucky.

(1)Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*)

Chives aren't uncommon; I find them most often in hedgerows around gardens, where they've escaped into the wild. If you've grown them yourself, you already know how to use these onion-tasting shoots. If you've only bought them, then I urge you to either grow some (scavenge a clump from a friend or neighbour, or grow them from seed) or forage for them. They're much more pleasant freshly picked. In February it's mostly just the shoots and young flower buds you'll see. Near the end of the month you may come across the vibrant purple flower heads, which make an almost irresistible addition to Spring salads. The shoots aren't easy to mistake for anything else, when you've got an eye for them, but till then be careful, as you could mistake some of the other wild bulbs for them. Pictures at:

http://www.cjb.unige.ch/BotSyst/APG2/Lilid/100_ALL_As.jpg

http://www.bungalow104.com/garden/terrace/image_chives.html
(2) Alexanders (*Smyrniolum olusatrum*)

It's really in March that Alexanders will be easy to spot, but if you know where to look you can find this plant growing near the coast and occasionally on waste places inland in February. It's one of the umbellifers which we can thank the Romans for introducing, they brought it over as a green vegetable, and a superb one it is too. Pick the young stems at this time of year 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 moulles 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. Pictures at:

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/T1059.HTM>

<http://www.floralimages.co.uk/pic3c9.htm>
(3) Chickweed (*Stellaria media*)

Having

spent all winter skulking in a corner of the vegetable patch or under a bush, chickweed is about to make a bid to take over your garden. Later in the year you'll be pulling it out by the handful as the pest that it is, but at the moment it's a most welcome green vegetable on an otherwise un-encouraging vegetable plot. This is one of my favourite greens, and it can be found 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

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(4) 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. Through winter it was sitting in little crowns in the woods, not doing a great deal, but now you'll see that it's getting bushier, leafier and softer. 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:

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http://honeybee.helsinki.fi/USERS/KORPELA/anthriscus_sylvestris.html
(5) Nettle (*Urtica dioica*)

You

all know what nettles look like, and probably that you can eat them. The truth is that most people never try, being put off by the thought of handling a horribly stinging plant. If you can get past that, though, you're set for a real feast. Nettles are best young and tender, and right now you'll find them at their tastiest. 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://linnaeus.nrm.se/flora/di/urtica/urtic/urtidio4.jpg>
 (6) 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. Pictures at:

http://www.coestatepark.com/rorippa_nasturtium_aquaticum.htm

<http://www.naturesongs.com/vvplants/watercress1.jpg>
 (7) Sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*)

Possibly

the finest, and certainly the trendiest, of all of the wild greens you'll find. It's a marvellous plant, related to the dock, rhubarb and the awful, awful Japanese knotweed, and it's common throughout most of the British Isles in hedgerows and woodlands. It forms dense green rosettes of leaves, and has a sharp, almost lemony flavour. Use it raw in salad, add it to potato soup, use it in sauces with meat or fish, in fact anywhere that its sharp flavour can be appreciated it'll find a place in your kitchen. In February it's producing lots of leaves, ready to sprout flowers in May, at which time it will remain edible, but it'll be a tiny bit more acid. But all through the year, the combination of rocket, lettuce and sorrel will make a sharp, tasty salad that is hard to improve upon. Until you get the nose for picking sorrel, be very careful; the young leaves of ladies fingers, a deadly poisonous plant, can look somewhat similar to an untrained eye. Keep your eyes open for your first season looking at such plants, by midsummer you'll be happily eating sorrel. The related sheeps sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*) can be used just the same way, and wood sorrel (*Oxalis acetosa*) is a very different plant, but one which can be used the same way. Pictures at:

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/P3/P34743.HTM>

http://honeybee.helsinki.fi/mmsbl/kurssit/Verso_ja_siementunnistus/sivut/kasvit_tiet_ens/rumex_acetosa.htm
 (8) 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.

The leaves are just beginning to sprout anew, and you'll find lots of soft, green growth to add to salads. Towards the end of the month, you'll also start finding flowers. All of the plant is edible, and it's all useful. The leaves are never sweet, but at the moment they're not 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. Alternatively, take a plant in your lawn or by the veg patch in late February and stick a plant pot over it, it'll bleach like its relative chicory, and you can serve it in the way they do in really posh restaurants. The roots aren't so good right now, so don't go digging the plant up. Leave 'em till autumn. Pictures at:

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

http://www.florelixir.net/html_photo/taraxacum%20officinalis.html
(9) Morel (*Morchella esculenta*, *M. vulgaris*, *M. rotunda*)

This

is one of the most prized mushrooms. It's like a brown brain on a stick, but rather than the lobes pointing outwards, they all poke inwards. It's found in Spring, but you'll find it in February in mixed and coniferous woodlands, especially if the soil is a bit sandy or has been burned, and occasionally on wood chippings. In my opinion, it's overrated, but some people go crazy over it. Make sure you get all the sand and bugs out of the lobes, and be sure to cut it in two to make sure all the beasties are gone. Then you can cook it down with a little cream and some seasoning, and serve it on toast. There are many other ways to cook it, and being a somewhat 'gastronomic' fungus you'll find all manner of recipes in cook books. Be careful not to confuse it with the false Morel, *Gymomyces esculenta*, which rather than being like a holy-brain is more lobe like. A quick look at pictures of this mushroom will be enough for you to distinguish it from true morels. Pictures at:

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/T30294.HTM>

http://home.wanadoo.nl/abiemans/e_morch_esc.html
(10) Sweet Chestnut (*Castanea sativa*)

Bit

of a wild card for February this one, I've found eatable chestnuts maybe one February in two, but when I do find them they're a real joy. They'll be sitting amongst the decaying leaves and the new green Spring growth that's just starting to sprout, and finding good nuts that the squirrels have missed is always a delight. They fall, ripe, from the trees in late Autumn, but depending on the conditions they can survive all winter and still be there to eat until the early Spring; if there was a good autumn harvest, chances are you'll be able to pick bowls full into early February. Use them as you would bought ones, there are thousands of recipes for chestnuts. Pictures at:

<http://botany.cs.tamu.edu/FLORA/pic1/chestnut.jpg>

http://www.punchstock.com/stock_photography/italiastock/3333107/image_IS1FRU1059.html