

Top Ten Wild Foods in March

Contributed by Cab

March is the start of Spring, or at least it is in theory. It can sometimes seem as cold as February, if not colder, but the longer days and extra sunlight will encourage all manner of goodies to start growing. Not many mushrooms around yet, and not a lot of substance to most of what you'll forage, but the flavour of the wild harvest in March is hard to beat. But the best kept secret of wild food hunting in March is the that some of the spring flowers you see around you are good eating.

You'll understand, I hope, that I'm going to refrain from encouraging you to eat wild primroses, cowslips and violets, although these flowers make capital eating. Leave them where they are, they are far too precious to be picking for the table. Besides, I have some suggestions for other wild flowers that may surprise you. Odds are, you've got some of them in your lawn...

Remember, many plants already mentioned in February but not included here are still good, merely not in my top ten for the month. Dandelions, chickweed and chives are still around and still excellent, for example.

(1) Alexanders (*Smyrniolus olusatrum*)

Alexanders are an umbellifer 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), and also inland by some roadsides and some waste places, where it can almost inexplicably grow to the exclusion of 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.

Pictures at:

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

<http://www.floralimages.co.uk/pic3c9.htm>

(2) 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.

In February you'd have found this in little crowns of leaves, just starting to grow. Now it'll be thinking about throwing shoots up to flower later in the year, so it's getting bushier and bigger. If you've the confidence, this is the time to pick great handfulls of this intriguing relative of chervil, for soup, salad or flavouring bread.

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

(3) 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.

You might just find watercress in flower in March. Don't let that out you off at all, as unlike many wild vegetables the quality of watercress is little diminished by flowering.

Pictures at:

http://www.coestatepark.com/rorippa_nasturtium_aquaticum.htm<http://www.naturesongs.com/vvplants/watercress1.jpg>

(4) 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 March you'll find that sorrel is just beginning to go mad; the tight green growth of February is not becoming more lush, bushier, and more bountiful. Pick it now for salad, eat it in sandwiches with cream cheese and tomatoes, cook it in a sauce for fish... The uses for sorrel are almost endless.

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.

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

(5) Lesser Celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*)

The celandine is a wonderful spring flower; bright golden yellow flowers with glossy, heart shaped green leaves. And at least in the South of England it is very reliable; it flowers from the last week in February every year through to the middle of summer.

Don't faff about preparing this plant for the table, merely pick the flowers and leaves and toss them into a spring salad. The flavour is mild, but the colour is excellent.

Pictures

at:<http://www.kulak.ac.be/facult/wet/biologie/pb/kulakbiocampus/lage%20planten/Ranunculus%20ficaria%20bulbosus%20-%20Gewoon%20speenkruid/speenkruid.htm><http://bellquel.scuole.bo.it/scuole/serpieri/erbario/immagini%20erbacee%20spontanee/Ranunculaceae/Ranunculus%20ficaria%202.jpg>(6) Daisy (*Bellis perennis*)

Yes, the daisy flowers in your lawn. And their leaves. They're ever so slightly peppery, but they're very small and very pretty. Pick them at the last minute for serving in a salad or as a garnish (so they done close up), and I guarantee that any dinner guests will comment on how pretty your dinner is.

The leaves and flowers are edible.

Other species of daisy, such as the ox-eye daisy (*Chrysanthemum leucanthemum*) aren't of such culinary interest; stick with the common or garden *Bellis perennis*.

Pictures (not that you need them!) at:

<http://linnaeus.nrm.se/flora/di/astera/belli/bellper1.jpg>http://www.boga.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/html/Bellis_perennis_Foto.html

(7) Garlic Mustard, or Jack by the Hedge (*Alliaria petiolata*)

I pick this one young in March, but if you find young, soft foliage on the plants later in the year then it's still likely to be good. Again, follow the rule that if it hasn't flowered, it's probably still sweet.

Although if ever this pungent wild herb can be described as sweet I'm not sure. It's unsurprising that this plant should taste somewhat of mustard (a close relative), but the undertones of garlic can be quite unexpected.

Even at its best, it's only a passable salad vegetable. But it comes into its own as a cooked green, mixed with other greens. Add some with spinach or nettles. Add some to watercress soup. Mix it in with nettles, sorrel and cow parsley and use it for flavouring bread. Basically, any time you want a garlic and mustard flavour, this neat little wild plant will do the job.

Pictures at:

http://www.toyen.uio.no/botanisk/nbf/plantefoto/alliaria_petiolata_Per_M_Hagen01.jpghttp://www.kulak.ac.be/facult/wet/biologie/pb/kulakbiocampus/buiten-kulak/lage_planten/Alliaria%20petiolata%20-%20Look-zonder-look/look-zonder-look.htm

(8) 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, so pick the young plants and the tops from older ones; it's unlikely to be in flower yet, but take care not to include the stems especially from those plants that are going to seed. You can make a perfectly good string from those stems, so you don't want to be cooking with them!

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-](http://www.plant-identification.co.uk/skye/urticaceae/urtica-dioecia.htm)

<http://linnaeus.nrm.se/flora/di/urtica/urtic/urtidio4.jpg>(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, and March is probably the best time to go hunting for it. You get it 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, *Gymnomitria 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) Hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*)

An almost ubiquitous umbellifer, and one of the best wild vegetables you'll ever taste; I've included it at number ten here not because the first nine are better, but because you're likely to find it at the end of the month. Find it on waste ground, around woodlands, hedgerows, pretty much anywhere. After cow parsley it's probably the next most common wild umbellifer.

Look out for giant hogweed; it's not edible, and it's something of an irritant. Make sure you're picking real hogweed shoots, even if that means you're spending a season getting to know the plant.

Pick the shoots young; you want a bit of soft stem with a little leaf on it. Cook it like asparagus and serve with melted butter, it's divine.

Pictures at:

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/R151050.HTM><http://www.kulak.ac.be/facult/wet/biologie/pb/kulakbiocampus/images/age%20planten/Heracleum%20sphondylium%20-%20Berenklauw/>To discuss this article click [here](#).