As a young man I enjoyed books such as My Side of The Mountain and other tales of leaving behind people, cities, work, and responsibilities to live off the land. I dreamed of making my own shelter, gathering food, hunting, and immersing myself deep in the wilderness. My early dreams of solitude and self-sufficiency have survived into adulthood, but it was in my early teens that I first realized I was a forager. I could not pass by a blackberry bush without eating my fill, and blueberries, raspberries, huckleberries, and wild strawberries all provided me with a sweet treat while I spent time in the woods far from the urban world. Today, I still carry these dreams and their values, as well as a field guide for reference and a basket in which to collect my treasures.*

Foraging started for me about 20 years ago. I was comfortable with certain basic plant identifications, such as dandelion greens and wintergreen, however it was during a Watershed Education program that I helped instruct when I decided to push my foraging skills to the next level. As part of the celebration at the end of the course, all of the students were asked to prepare a dish to share. The challenge, though, was that each contribution had to incorporate a wetland theme. As you might expect, there was a bounty of delicious blueberry, cranberry, and rice options to choose from. One of the students, however, prepared an entrée with cattails. I remember the rhizomes tasting starchy like undercooked potatoes, but the exposure to something new was a turning point for me, and I was eager to discover all the wild edibles I had been missing—or overlooking.

After experiencing the culinary unexpected with the cattails, I knew foraging could bring me closer to the earth, awakening the hunter-gatherer in me. I purchased my first field guide, Edible Wild Plants of Eastern/Central North America, by Lee Allen Peterson. This book consumed me and filled my mind with thoughts of collecting and cooking these wild treasures, bringing the most basic of human behavior into my everyday world.

New foragers need only a few simple tools to get started. A cloth bag with a removable hard bottom is my go-to for collection and transport of everything I find. A pocket knife has many uses including delicate digging, cutting, and scraping. A magnifying glass will help with the identification process. But above all, an excellent field guide is a must.

Walking in the Woods of Opportunity

The seasons dictate what is available for foraging, and winter in New Hampshire can be very lean. What treats can be found on a winter’s walk? Many fallen tree nuts are still available for the taking if you know where to look, and I stick to the choice selections when it comes to winter foraging. Snacking on beechnuts, found beneath beech trees, begins in late fall, and often the nuts are present on the ground through late winter. Beechnuts are by far my favorite foraged nut; they are similar in size to pine nuts and their taste is sweet.

Once my pockets are full of beechnuts, I move through the forest on the lookout for other cold-weather bounty. Wintergreen is a low-growing plant that produces a red berry, and its shiny green foliage accented with crimson contrasts vibrantly against frozen ground and fallen leaves, making it easy to spot. While the berry is edible, it’s the leaf that I’m after. I just want to chew on the foliage and release its fragrance of wintergreen—it’s a flavor burst, a taste sensation, and a real treat in February.

Springtime is the season of plenty for the forager, when tender, succulent plants begin to emerge from the warming soil. Foraging in the spring is full of choices and opportunities, but I always stick

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*Treats Along the Way
Walks in the Woods Become a Quest for Wild Edibles

This article is meant for general information only. Identification of wild plants requires particular care and attention. Some species that are dangerous or even deadly can look similar to edible ones.
with the most select offerings. One of the true highlights of spring is ramps (wild leeks), which I discovered while turkey hunting. Wild leeks grow in rich, moist soils, and the sweet onion and garlic notes make this an extremely versatile plant. Wild leeks are easy to harvest — just pull up the plant, roots and all. A quick rinse in the creek and they are carefully placed into my forager’s bag.

Noontime ends the spring turkey hunt which means it’s time to go fishing. I set up on one of the banks of the Connecticut River with the hope of landing a walleye, but I am equally motivated to hunt for a storied wild edible. The rich, sandy soils of the Connecticut River are home to my favorite spring treat: fiddleheads! Many types of ferns grow in the Granite State and most of them have a fiddlehead shape when they first emerge. This is another instance where your field guide becomes your most trusted partner in the woods to ensure proper identification because some ferns are toxic.

The only fern for me is the ostrich fern. Watch for their fronds throughout the year which look like a single ostrich feather growing out of a mound. This mound is where the fiddlehead will sprout from in the spring. Select tightly curled fiddled heads ranging in size from one inch to three inches in diameter. Their thin, brown paper-like membrane is another key to their identification. I always take care to leave half of any discovered mound unpicked. I want to be able to come back the next year to harvest the same plants. Harvested fiddleheads should be thoroughly washed, and while they can be eaten raw, it is best to cook fiddleheads to 160 degrees to avoid potential food-borne illnesses. Flavor profiles are unique and run from “green bean-like” to “asparagus-esque.”

Spring’s bounty continues to present itself in the forests. Wood sorrel is common in New Hampshire, and I walked by it for years until I learned I could eat it. This short-growing, parsley-like leaf plant has a bitter kick, but when paired with Indian cucumber you can enjoy a flavor-balanced
Thoroughly rinse 6 cups (1 ½ pounds) of raw fiddleheads and drain excess water. Rub away papery membranes.

Preheat a 14-inch skillet on medium high. Add 2 tablespoons of olive oil. Once the oil is hot, add the fiddleheads. Sprinkle with two pinches of kosher salt and 4 grinds of black pepper.

Cook for 5 minutes stirring often. You want to fully sauté them.

Once the fiddleheads soften and uncurl, turn down the heat to medium. Add 3 tablespoons of quality balsamic vinegar. Reduce the vinegar for another 4-5 minutes.

Serve hot. If there are leftovers, the fiddleheads go great in a quiche. A good sharp cheese will complement the balsamic vinegar flavor.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.
If you have an interest in foraging for wild edibles, put in the time to learn plant identification and invest in a comprehensive field guide. Positive identification is a must and checking with a local specialist for consultation is recommended.

Clockwise from top left: beech nuts • blackberries • raspberries • wild strawberries • lowbush blueberries • black huckleberries • Indian cucumber • ramps • wintergreen • ostrich fern • fiddlehead • wild carrot • dandelion.
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