

Ethical Guidelines for Foraging for Food and Medicines in the Wild

Overharvesting, particularly due to commercial collection of medicinal plants has brought many once plentiful plant species to the brink of extinction. As foragers we should adopt an attitude of green guardianship for our planet, as well as showing respect and gratitude to the plants and the land.

- Familiarize yourself with the wild plants, herbs, bushes and trees in your area try to learn as much as possible about the ecosystem of which you are a part.
- Learn to identify them correctly and investigate all their uses.
- Learn to identify the poisonous plants you are likely to encounter. **DO NOT EAT ANYTHING YOU CANNOT POSITIVELY IDENTIFY AND DEEM SAFE.**
- When you think you know a plant, always cross-reference to be 100 percent sure because non-edible look-alikes can fool you.
- Try to understand it as part of a larger ecosystem. With which other plants does it form communities? Is it native or introduced? What kind of soil is it growing on? Does it protect the ground after a disturbance? Building this kind of holistic knowledge base will give you a much deeper insight into the nature of a plant and its role within the ecosystem.
- Familiarize yourself with the plants that are listed on the endangered species list for your area. Apart from being unethical, it is also illegal to pick endangered plant species. Instead of taking rare plants, consider sowing their seeds in the wild or in a protected area in your homestead.
- Obtain permission from land-owners to gather plants.
- Only pick as much as you need and only take one in ten plants. Never take ALL the plants of any one kind in a given patch. After harvesting an area give the plants plenty of time to recover before returning to the same patch. Be very careful when it comes to harvesting roots. Remember that often harvesting roots means the end of the plant, so before you start digging ask yourself if this plant is really plentiful and if it can sustain a harvest of its roots. Replant small root pieces in the same area. If in doubt, don't collect.
- However tempting it may look, never pick in places that are subject to pollution, roadsides, trail edges, industry or heavy spraying of farm chemicals. If the plant is endangered, try to collect the seeds so you can propagate it elsewhere.
- Collecting wild edibles growing in soil that was brought in from another area may not be desirable. It could be soil that was contaminated with pesticides, herbicides or fertilizers.
- Don't collect from nature reserves or parks - these are areas set up to protect wild species, so give them their space and let them be!
- Cast seeds of native species to the earth and to the winds once in a while - as a way of giving something back. Give thanks in some way. Consider adopting a little patch that you are particularly fond of.
- Ask permission to the plant and the land before harvesting and express your gratitude afterwards.

On the issue of digging/transplanting wild plants for growing in your garden, instead of digging wild plants, it is better to buy from native plant nurseries, or to grow them from seed. Certain native species will never transplant successfully, regardless of how much care you give them.

- Some species of wildflowers live all or part of their lives in an interdependent or symbiotic relationship with certain species of soil fungi. Chemicals from the fungi may be required to germinate seeds. The fungi may also be necessary to break down nutrients and provide channels of transport to the root hairs of the host plant. These fungi often require very specific soil conditions. Change the conditions, even slightly, and the fungi will die;

the plants will languish, perhaps for several years, and then also die. Some wildflowers in this category are Mayflower, almost all orchids, Pipsissewa and the Pyrolas.

- Species known as parasites or saprophytes should never be transplanted. These include Indian-pipe, Indian paintbrush, Eyebright¹ and Lousewort.
- Other species have evolved to tolerate only very specialized habitat, with particular soil, light, moisture, drainage and climatic conditions. Some of these species may require a single species of pollinator to produce viable seed. Wildflowers in the highly specialized category that should not be transplanted include pitcher plants, sundews, butterworts, walking fern, hart's tongue fern and clubmoss.

Once you have collected your wild edibles make sure your body will not reject this new food:

- First, rinse or wash the parts of the plant you are using.
- Test one plant at a time – preferably only one new plant per day.
- Test the plant first by rubbing it on your skin. If there is no reaction, then rub part of the plant on your lips. If there is no reaction there then eat a small portion of the plant. If you experience no reaction at all, then all should be well.

When to Harvest Edible Wild Food

Wild edibles should be harvested when the oils responsible for flavour and aroma are at their peak. Proper timing depends on the plant part you are harvesting and the intended use. If you are collecting wild edible plants for their foliage then to maximize the nutritional content, they should be harvested before they flower. After flowering they are still good for you and they still contain vitamins, minerals and nutrients, just not as plentiful.

Optimal time for collecting flowers such as chamomile should be done just before it reaches its maximum size. Harvest of roots, such as burdock, dandelion or chicory, is best in the autumn after the foliage fades.

Some general guidelines are:

- Begin harvesting when the plant has enough foliage to maintain growth.
- Harvest early in the morning, after the dew dries, but before the heat of the day.
- Harvest the wild edible before flowering, otherwise, leaf production declines.
- Most flowers have their most intense oil concentration and flavour when harvested after flower buds appear but before they open.

Sources: Adapted from <http://www.ediblewildfood.com/foraging-for-food.aspx>
The Wild Gardener. James Hodgins. Wildflower magazine. Spring 1986.
Insights from workshops on Plant Spirit by Marilyn Walker.

¹ The Eyebright will not grow readily in a garden if transplanted, unless 'protected' apparently, by grass. The reason for this is that it is a semi-parasite, relying for part of its nourishment on the roots of other plants. Above ground, it appears to be a perfectly normal plant, with normal flowers and bright green leaves - the leaves of fully parasitic plants are almost devoid of green colouring matter - but below the surface, suckers from its roots spread round and lie on the rootlets of the grassplants among which it grows. Where they are in contact, tiny nodules form and send absorption cells into the grass rootlets. The grass preyed upon does not, however, suffer very much, as the cells penetrate but a slight distance, moreover the Eyebright being an annual, renewing itself from year to year, the suckers on the grass roots to which it is attached also wither in the autumn, so there is no permanent drain of strength from the grass.
<http://www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/e/eyebri20.html>