

# Taste treats from wild among weeds

Plants you and I view as weeds are edible to Oakland Community College-Orchard Ridge campus students who have taken Bill McNaughton's wild-food class.

While McNaughton dwells on the gourmet side of wild foods, he also teaches that much foliage is edible, if not too tasty.

Take cattails, for example. Peel the dark green leaves from the stalk and you have heart of cattail. When eaten right out of the swamp it tastes a bit like cucumber. Sliced, as part of a salad, it smacks of artichoke hearts.

A typical wild food forage at Orchard Ridge goes like this:

McNaughton hands out copies of the day's menu and assigns work groups.

"Today you three will be the grape leaf pickers and you two will be the wild ginger gatherers. I need volunteers for cattail cutters. We'll need nettles, sweet clover, violet leaves and flowers."

He continued naming ingredients to be gathered. The students formed groups, made certain each had a plastic bag and started across campus.

ONE REMARKED quietly to a friend, "O.K., folks, here we go to eat the lawn again."

For added pep, before the work began McNaughton had several pans of water with leaves in the bottom—brewing spearmint tea which he served with honey sweetener.

It was no mint julep but it did have a pleasant, minty flavor that received unanimous approval.

Hardly out the door, McNaughton wanted everyone to know sweet clover when they saw it. Later on when the pink clover bloomed, they would prepare a gourmet delight—the pink clover flowers dipped in batter and deep fried.

Next he double checked the group on burdock, a plant which looks like rhubarb. Someone gathered burdock (stems only and later peeled the peaky little things).

Before sending the groups off McNaughton found a small of pepper grass and shepherd's purse and explained what parts of each are edible.

THEN THE FORAGING began. The cattail pickers headed for the bog, the clover pickers to the open fields, and the ginger gatherers to the woods.

The grape leaf pickers followed their teacher who pointed out the good news of grape tendrils.

"You can be sure of wild grape leaves if the vine has tendrils. We'll put the tendrils in salad."

GRAPE TENDRILS have a pungent sour flavor as opposed to the tender willow shoots, stripped of leaves, which have a flowery flavor on the tongue.

With a good supply of tender, new, wild grape leaves, the group headed for the nature trail through the woods,

searching for wild ginger. McNaughton, who along with his students and other life-science faculty members, planned and cut the nature trail, headed off the trail and through the woods to a ginger patch.

Just about the time he decided it had eluded him, there it was, fat dark green leaves poking through the underbrush. He pulled up just enough plants, cut the roots and threw them in a small plastic bag to make some candy. Although ginger will send up new shoots, never take more than you need, he explained.

He spotted wild strawberry plants, not yet in blossom.

"Wild strawberries are just loaded with vitamin C. If the Pilgrims had just known about wild strawberries, they wouldn't have lost half their number in the first year."

"Most wild things have a lot more food value than what we buy in grocery stores."

He pulled a leaf from a small basswood tree and suggested everyone try one. One student said, "It all tastes like grass to me."

PASSING a stand of sumac, McNaughton said the pink flowers which appear in mid-summer make an excellent summer drink a lot like pink lemonade.

"Soak the berries in water, strain them and add sugar," he cautioned them. White sumac is poison, but pink is good.

Did they know he asked, that dandelion roots, dried and ground, make a mild coffee or that yarrow (that feathery leafed plant with the yellow flower that as kids we used to pick) makes a good, but rather strong tea?

Well, no. Not too many knew that. Or that yarrow tea is reputedly a cure for baldness.

The trillium along the nature trail was fading fast, but patches of adder's tongue were in evidence.

"THE ADDER'S tongue bulb, sautéed, tastes a little like roast chestnuts," McNaughton remarked.

As the group headed back toward Building J, McNaughton warned against eating marsh marigolds unless they are boiled twice. Do it once, throw the water away and do it again.

By the time everyone was back, bags heavy with green goodies, it was time for a cup of nettle tea. Someone decided you could turn the tea into nettle soup by adding a dash of Parmesan cheese.

One student described the nettle soup flavor as something like clam chowder with a smidge of raw fish thrown in.

He liked the flavor and praised the nettle's versatility. "It's hard to imagine you can get so many different dishes from one weed."



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