

Many are edible

Weeds may be culinary delicacies

By Penny Wright
Special writer

Think again before trashing that unsightly weed growing between the cracks of your sidewalk. It's probably purslane.

And with a little preparation, that spreading cluster of paddle-shaped leaves could be gracing your dinner plate this evening.

Strange notion? Not so. According to Ellen Weatherbee, most of us are overlooking the food potential of our own weed-choked yards.



Watercress

WEATHERBEE, AN authority on edible wild plants, teaches courses on the subject at the University of Michigan and, more recently, at Schoolcraft College. Interest in her courses is so lively that many of her Ann Arbor students drive to Livonia to take the Schoolcraft course.

(The edible plants course will be offered 7-9 p.m. four Wednesdays beginning Sept. 21. Weatherbee also will teach a course called the Fall Hiker. Registration information is available from the college's community services office at 591-6400, Ext. 409.)

She bubbles with enthusiasm when she speaks of

the mouth-watering delights of wild plants. To the knowledgeable, back yards, roadside fields, railroad embankments and construction sites can be treasure troves of edible delicacies.

This summer, berries of all kinds are available for picking, along with wild rice, pokeweed, watercress, sheep sorrel and lamb's quarters.

"All of these plants can be fixed in a very fine fashion when they are small and tender," Weatherbee said. "But when they get old, it's like eating dirt."

SHE IS CO-AUTHOR with botanist James Garrett Bruce, of "Edible Wild Plants: A Guide to Collecting and Cooking" (1979, Macmillan Co., New York, 127 pages).

The book details the collecting process and the preparation of edible wild plants native to the Great Lakes region. Recipes bear such exotic names as purslane gumbo, sunnec chicken and pawpaw pudding.

Weatherbee started eating wild edibles during graduate school days in Ann Arbor. "My mother and father could never understand why I ate weeds. They insisted we had enough money to buy fresh vegetables," she recalled.

Wild edibles are available year around, Weatherbee said. This fall, collectors will find a host of fruits and nuts and a second crop of nettles.

During winter, tubers — underground roots or stem structures — will provide tempting fare. "It's an obnoxious time to be digging for plants," she admitted, "but the harvest is worth it."

DANGERS DO exist for those unschooled in plant lore.

While most people have learned to be wary of mushrooms, Weatherbee warns that plant look-alikes can spell trouble. For example, poison hemlock and water hemlock look similar to their cousin, the edible wild carrot, but are poisonous and should be avoided.

To ensure safe eating, Weatherbee recommends learning wild plant basics before setting off on a collecting spree.

"It doesn't take a lot of time to learn the edibles," she said. "Most people need to be shown only once or twice."

Antiques at Botsford

Botsford Inn will serve as the backdrop for an antique show that will be held at the historic hostelry Sunday and Monday, Sept. 4 and 5.

Botsford Inn will also be selling some of its antiques.

Show hours are noon to 5-9 p.m. Sunday and noon to 7 p.m. Monday. Botsford Inn is located on Grand River at Eight Mile Road in Farmington Hills.

There is no admission charge. Many old country items are coming to the show, said show coordinator Marjorie Kullifay. A spinning wheel, wash stands and textiles from the Pennsylvania area will be featured. The handmade textiles will include towels, quilts and bed linens.

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