



Weed Eaters



THE ULTIMATE FARM-TO-TABLE FOOD SOURCE?
YOUR OWN BACKYARD.
BY SANDRA HUME

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE GLASS

AURA CASCARDI IS BEING POLITE. I CAN TELL SHE

doesn't want to freak me out or yank me from my comfort zone. So I ask: "Can I try that?"

Of course I can. I taste both the leaves and the seed pod of the *malva neglecta*, the plant we're stooped next to in an alley just west of Mason Street. I recognize the plant from our family's gardening exploits of the past weekend (soon, sadly, to be lost to hail), and I'm pretty sure there's a pile of them along with mown grass in our yard, waiting for compost. But now I chew them. They're not bad. The seed pod, in particular, has good flavor. "The leaves are spectacular, and the seed pods are fun, crunchy things to throw in a salad," Cascardi tells me.

We move on. It's a mid-June morning in Old Town. Alleys are Cascardi's favorite places for an herb walk like this—the weeds are plentiful, and being off the road, vehicle pollution is not a risk. "Our best herbs are in the alley—our best food, and our best medicine," she says.

Malva neglecta. Lactuca serriola. Polygamum avuncular. Chenopodium album. The Latin names, confusing to me, are as familiar to Laura as streets in her neighborhood. "Try this one," she urges, and I chew. "Oh wow," I say. The *chenopodium album*—aka lamb's quarters—is so tasty I'm surprised. "That's good," I say. "That's super-good," I amend, eloquently.

"I know!" she says.

Not bad for a weed.

"Eat Your Weeds" is, in fact, the title of one of Laura's sessions offered by places like Bath Nursery or Golden Poppy, Fort Collins' only apothecary, where she works as an herbalist. She also leads herb walks like our ad-hoc one in Old Town on the Spring Creek Trail and the Poudre Trail, showing people the wild things they can eat right in Fort Collins. With a degree in botany (CSU) and subsequent certificate in herbal studies (Rocky Mountain

survive the zombie apocalypse, and, in truth, that could be what drives some people (although you'd have to find a lot of weeds to help in that quest). But to most it's simply about being in touch with the land—reclaiming what the Native Americans always knew to value about their herbal environment.

Bob Seebeck of Drake, in Big Thompson Canyon, has been educating Coloradans on our local edible wild plants for 40 years. He's been known by the self-selected nickname "Cattail Bob" for most of them. Cattail is bearded and looks like a woodsman. His eyes are light and focused, and along with his gentle way of speaking, his face strikes me as one you can trust. Although he used to teach to the general public, these days he offers his "Survival Plants" class as an elective through community colleges across the state or via city-sponsored programs like Loveland Parks & Recreation. On location, he teaches willing students to identify wild edible herbal and medicinal plants as well as those that can be used as tools (think fire). And we're not just talking 10 or 15 species. On a recent class he led at Larimer County Open Space, the variety of plant life was so vast that he and his students ended up making it through only the first 400 yards of the trail. "In four hours, we covered maybe 75 plants."

Cattail likens today's resurging interest in foraging and medicinal herbs to the 1970s, when he started teaching and "all the hippies were into nature." In his childhood, he remembers, "people accepted doctors' opinion as gospel. Nowadays they're open to looking for alternatives."

He doesn't claim to know precisely why foraging has been regaining momentum. He doesn't particularly care. He's just glad it's happening.

THERE ARE WAYS to do foraging well. From her home in Breckenridge, Erica Marciniac writes the Wild

Foraging for restaurants has become a business, and while that in and of itself isn't a bad thing, the key is... "sustainable" and "conscious."

Center for Botanical Studies), Laura has been using edible and medicinal herbs for herself and her family since 1996.

"Half of the weeds in our backyard are our food," she says, delicately holding the leaves on purslane. "You see these succulent leaves here? Delicious and a little bit sour. You can take the top off and put it in your salad. This is probably growing in your backyard right now. If it's in your garden, maybe under your peppers, just keep it as an understory and harvest it." I scribble furiously, wondering if I'm taking notes for a story or myself.

Welcome to Foraging 2014. It may sound like a way to

Food Girl blog (wildfoodgirl.com) detailing her escapades gathering, eating, and cooking wild foods and publishes a monthly newsletter with related photos and recipes. "What's really cool about wild food foraging, when it's done sustainably and consciously, you can find free organic fare while deepening your connection with the natural world," she says.

There are also ways to not do it well. Foraging for restaurants has become a business, and while that in and of itself isn't a bad thing, the key is in Erica's words—"sustainable" and "conscious." Irresponsible foraging for profit can result in depleted supplies of once-abundant



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—LAURA CASCARDI



DANDELION
Taraxacum officinale



SALISFY
Tragapogon dubius



ALFALFA
Medicago Sativ



PURSLANE
Portulaca oleracea



DEVIL'S SHOESTRINGS
Polygonum aviculare

TOP PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE GLASS



“...Through only the first 400 yards of the trail... we covered maybe 75 plants.”

—“CATTAIL BOB” SEEBECK



HOPS
Humulus lupulus



RED CURRANT
Ribes cereum



MALLOW
Malva neglecta



SPEARMINT
Mentha spicata



AMARANTH
Amaranthus spp.

TOP PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE GLASS

wild food, like the east-coast wild onions known as ramps that are in such demand in New York City restaurants.

But even with ramps, it's possible to forage sustainably. Experienced foragers have their own unwritten but widely followed rules to "leave the forest better than you found it," says Nick Martinez, co-owner of Denver-based wild-food distributor Hunt and Gather. Don't take more than a certain percentage of what's available, don't dig up roots, and make sure there's more than enough available for the next guy. The rules are the same even when the game changes; what's being over-harvested today might not have been in demand a few years ago. "Certain wild vegetables get popular," Erica says with a shrug in her voice. "No one seems to want my wild mustard."

Hunt and Gather is currently Colorado's only distributor of wild foods for culinary use, supplying edible foraged food for high-end restaurants like Acorn, Beatrice & Woodsley, and Fruition. "Colorado really has a lot to offer from a wild food standpoint," Martinez says. "I think it's really important for people to get involved in food and know where it's coming from, to get back to where we used to be." But, he adds, it's just as important to forage sustainably so you don't risk over-harvesting or foraging the wrong—that is, inedible or downright dangerous—food.

Closer to home, frequenters of Next Door restaurant in Loveland may have noticed wild greens showing up as a menu special once or twice. New Executive Chef Matt Smith comes to Northern Colorado from California, where "foraging is super-popular." The culinary wild-food trend was spurred by Noma, the renowned Copenhagen restaurant that has topped some best-on-the-planet lists more than once. In California, Smith says, some restaurants even have their own foragers. He's been excited to walk farms and properties around Fort Collins and

wild-food specials have included mustard greens steamed with grouper and a wild-arugula pesto.

BRIGITTE MARS DESCRIBES her breakfast today: "I stuffed the blender with lamb's quarters, cleaver, stinging nettle, yellow dock leaves, then added grapes, strawberries, avocado, and apple, blended it and decorated it with rose petals and honeysuckle blossoms."

Is this typical?

"A month ago it might have been violet blossoms."

Mars teaches herbal medicine at Boulder's Naropa University and has given herb walks from California to Germany to Mexico to Iceland. No place is immune to her foraging—or furthering her wild food message. "The average American recognizes 1000 logos but might not recognize more than five birds and five plants. But there's a plethora of wild edible plants everywhere. We need to re-educate ourselves and get rid of the mythology that all our food needs to come from a grocery store. With wild food the freshness is unsurpassed. Think about it: the greens you're eating were still growing five minutes ago."

These five-minute-old greens are also packed with nutrition. The lamb's quarters in Brigitte's blender, as just one example, are related to spinach, swiss chard, and beets, and heavy in vitamin, calcium, and phosphorus. And—let's not forget—they were also the weeds that so surprised me to chew. By and large, wild food offers something the truck can't deliver to the produce aisle: taste. "If you're growing something from the same seed as the guy down the street, no matter what you do, there's only so much variance in what you get," says Next Door's Smith. "But if it's wild? It can be amazing."

And wild stars that rank in the amazing taste category? Mushrooms—porcinis, chanterelles, and the ever-elusive



EAT THESE...

- Malva neglecta
- Dandelion
- Violet *viola odorata*.
- Purslane *portulaca*.
- Lamb's quarters.

NOT THESE...

- Poison Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*)
- Water Hemlock (*Cicuta douglasii*)
- Death Camas (*Zigadenus spp.*)
- Baneberry (*Actea rubra*)



- False Hellebore (*Veratrum spp.*)
- Henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*)
- Larkspur (*Delphinium spp.*)
- Monkshood (*Aconitum columbianum*)
- Poison Ivy (*Toxicodendron spp.*)

"With wild food the freshness is unsurpassed. Think about it: the greens you're eating were still growing five minutes ago." —Brigitte

Loveland to locate the best in wild greens. "There's no better way to go farm-to-table than to get something wild in your backyard. Just looking at the landscape of these farms and private properties, you notice the wild things growing. You can spend a lot of money on microgreens, or save yourself \$15 and find it yourself."

One of Smith's first wild-food visits was to Fort Collins' Fossil Creek Farm, where the Fort's newest foodie heaven, The Kitchen, also sources produce. "[The owner] had some wild watercress going, just growing by a tree stump. We're out on his ATV, scissors in hand, ankle-deep in water, cutting watercress." The watercress made its way into a Next Door special, in a broth with poached halibut. Other

more. Although second to only the Pacific Northwest in wild mushroom availability, Colorado isn't as well known in mushroom circles, but as the *New York Times* said back in 2011, it should be. Hunt and Gather, in fact, evolved from expert mycologist Graham Steinruck's mushroom hunting business; the company still offers mushroom tours (but, wisely, no guarantees of actual mushroom findings; the thrill is in the chase, after all). And because it's too easy to mistake a toxic mushroom for a culinary delight, in Colorado foragers can't supply wild mushrooms to restaurants unless they're licensed for mushroom identification and sale, as Graham is, by the Colorado Department of Health and Environment.

EAT YOUR WEEDS

Herb expert Brigitte Mars shares her 19 favorite (and ridiculously easy) ways to cook up wild foods.

- 1. SALAD.** Except for nettles, which must be cooked, most greens toss beautifully in a salad.
- 2. STEAMED.** Rinse well. Add to pan with a few dashes of tamari. Cover and steam till tender.
- 3. GREEN SOUP.** Sauté a chopped onion and 1 t. curry powder in a bit of olive oil. Add 3 washed chopped potatoes and several C. of washed and chopped greens. Add water and cook till the potatoes are tender. Blend most of the soup to vary the texture. Salt to taste.
- 4. EGGS FLORENTINE.** Add chopped greens to pan with a few T. of low fat cream cheese. Stir. Add 4 eggs in 4 little nests of the greens and cheese mixture. Cover and cook till the eggs are done. Season with salt and a dash of hot sauce.
- 5. DIP.** Blend clean chopped greens (except nettles) into yogurt, sour cream or tofu. Season with lemon, garlic, salt, and chopped toasted onion.
- 6. MEATLESS LOAF.** Mix greens with leftover rice, sautéed onions, sunflower seeds. Bake at 350 degrees for 1/2 hour.
- 7. SPICED.** Stir fry with onions and with curry powder, chili powder, Italian herbs, or Cajun spice blend.
- 8. SAMOSAS, CALZONES OR TURNOVERS.** Fold in with other ingredients.
- 9. STIR FRY.** Use greens in a sauté flavored with ginger and garlic. Serve with rice.
- 10. SAUCE.** Add a handful of greens with mushrooms to sauces.
- 11. CREAM SAUCE.** Add to rice milk or nut milk to make a dairy-free version.
- 12. SCRAMBLES.** Toss greens with scrambled eggs or tofu.
- 13. SAUTÉS.** Stir in with garlic, tomatoes, onion, and green pepper and serve with polenta.
- 14. CRÊPES.** Fill with sautéed greens, Top with a mushroom sauce.
- 15. VEGETABLE BLENDS.** Use in dishes with onions, carrots, and any other vegetable.
- 16. SOUFFLÉ.** Stir into egg mixture.
- 17. LASAGNA.** Use greens as you would spinach.
- 18. QUICHE.** Add to egg mixture.
- 19. SANDWICHES.** Use raw wild greens (except nettles) in place of lettuce.



(CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE)

But unless you're delivering morels to The Kitchen, all you need to indulge in the local-est of foods is an adventuresome spirit, good vision, and a willingness to be loosey-goosey. It's all so individually accessible, emphasizes Next Door's Smith. "It's not one of those things where I can tell you 'go down a mile and turn left,' and there it is. There aren't any guarantees. It's not always easy to find and some of it is going to taste better than others. But there will be that point where you find something you love, and the wild flavor will mean so much more than the two-week-old bag of spinach you paid four dollars for. You can't get more local than that."

CATTAIL AND I ARE SIPPING margaritas at La Luz's south location, talking about foraging in the past, present, and future, both as legend and as reality. Assumptions people make about him, he says, are interesting. "People think I live off the land and eat weeds all the time. I don't." It's true that he's more likely than the average guy to put together a wild salad (from his favorite sheep's sorrel, or dandelion greens, or whatever he happens to find that day) or cook wild food for guests. "But that's not routine." As he leaves he hands me his business card—it indeed says "Cattail Bob," right next to his email address—and since he knows I'm staying for lunch, he throws back a suggestion.

"Try the relleño."

Like I said, he has a face you can trust. So I do.

SANDRA HUME is a writer for hire in Fort Collins, where she lives with her husband and their two tweens and a toddler. Her web site is sandrahume.com.

RESOURCES

Want to forage on your own? Here's how to get started.

TAKE A CLASS

- Search online for a local weed-eating class or herb walk like Laura's, Brigitte's, or Cattail's. This fall, Golden Poppy Apothecary's tentatively named Fort Collins Center for Herbal Studies will begin offering a nine-month program with a range of classes focusing on how and why to use herbs and herbal medicine (goldenpoppy-herbs.com).

READ UP

- *Edible Wild Plants: Wild Foods From Dirt To Plate* by John Kallas
- *Survival Plants of Colorado* by Cattail Bob Seebeck
- Wild Food Girl's blog (wildfoodgirl.com) or her monthly online publication, Wild Edible Notebook (wildfoodgirl.com/wild-edible-notebook/)



THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

- Wild Edibles by Steve "Wildman" Brill: \$7.99
- Wild Edibles by Sergei Boutenko: \$4.99
- iPlant with Brigitte Mars: A Wild Plant Reference Guide: \$2.99

RECIPES

...From Matt Smith, chef,
Next Door, Loveland



WILD ARUGULA PESTO

Yield: 2 cups

INGREDIENTS:

- 4 C. wild fresh arugula (flowers removed)
- 2 C. basil (stems removed)
- 1 T. minced garlic
- Salt and freshly ground pepper
- 1 C. extra virgin olive oil
- 2 T. pine nuts, toasted
- 1/4 C. freshly grated Parmesan

INSTRUCTIONS:

Prepare an ice water bath in a large bowl, and bring a large pot of water to a boil. Put all the arugula and basil in pot. Blanch for about 15 seconds. Remove, shake off the excess water, then plunge the arugula and basil into the ice water bath and stir again so it cools as fast as possible. Drain well.

Squeeze the water out of the arugula and basil with your hands until very dry. Roughly chop the arugula and basil. Put in a blender with the garlic, salt and pepper to taste, olive oil, 2 tablespoons of the pine nuts. Blend for at least 30 seconds. Add the cheese and pulse to combine. The pesto will keep several days in a tightly sealed container in the refrigerator.

Use arugula flowers as a garnish.

...From Wild Food Girl,
Erica Marciniac →

GINGER ROSEHIP VINAIGRETTE

INGREDIENTS:

- wild rosehips (*Rosa* spp.)
- vinegar
- garlic, finely chopped
- pickled ginger, finely chopped
- a splash of ginger-pickling liquid
- olive oil

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Make rosehip "sauce" by simmering whole fresh or dried wild rosehips in a small amount of water until soft, then mashing through a strainer to get a thick rosehip juice, leaving the seeds behind. Add sugar to taste, and simmer together until the sugar dissolves. Allow to cool.

2. Mix rosehip sauce with vinegar, garlic, pickled ginger, pickling liquid, and olive oil to taste, then let the dressing sit out for a bit so the flavors meld together.

3. Serve on salad or use as a marinade. It's nice with avocados, spinach, shredded carrots, and sesame seeds.

PENNYCRESS HONEY MUSTARD

INGREDIENTS:

- 1/3 C. field pennycress seeds, winnowed
- 4 T. flour
- 2 T. water
- 3 T. red wine vinegar
- 5 T. honey

INSTRUCTIONS:

Collect pennycress seeds (*Thlaspi arvense*) from brown, dry plants by stripping the penny-shaped pods into a collecting container. Crush dried seedpods to release seeds if necessary.

Winnow out as much of the dry chaff as you can. (Blow into the container so the chaff flies out, or use a big bowl to toss the mix into the air on a windy day, letting the chaff blow away while catching the heavier seeds again in the bowl.)

Toast the pennycress seeds briefly in a cast iron pan. Allow to cool. Grind seeds in a spice (coffee) grinder or with a mortar and pestle. Mix in flour. Add water, red wine vinegar and honey gradually, stirring to a syrupy consistency, and adjusting quantities as needed.

Makes 1 8-oz jar. The mustard will firm up slightly in the refrigerator. Great on pastrami or turkey sandwiches.

...From herbalist and
nutritional consultant
Brigitte Mars

DANDELION "MUSHROOMS"

- 15 dandelion blossoms, fresh picked and washed, leave moist
- 1/2 C. unbleached white flour
- 1/4 t. sea salt
- 2 T.s olive oil or butter

Mix the washed flowers with the flour and salt. heat the olive oil or butter in a pan and add the coated flowers, turning to brown on all sides. Serve hot. Excel-

lent with a side dish of rice. Tastes like mushrooms!

NETTLES PESTO

- 1 C. extra virgin olive oil
- 1/2 C. pine nuts, HempNut® or walnuts
- 7 cloves garlic
- 1/2 C. Parmesan cheese
- 4 C. lightly steamed nettles leaves without stems

Blend all the ingredients together to make a paste. Serve over fresh cooked pasta or with crackers. Makes 2 1/2 C.

DANDELION LOAF

- 1 C. dandelion flowers
- 1 1/2 C. day old bread, broken up into 1 inch pieces

- 2 eggs
- 1 chopped onion
- 1 stalk celery, chopped
- 1 T. nutritional yeast
- 1 t. sage
- 1 t. salt
- 1/2 t. pepper
- 2 T. vegetable oil
- 1 C. milk or milk substitute

Sauté onion and celery in vegetable oil. Add sage. Add dandelion blossoms, bread, eggs, salt, pepper, eggs. Mix. Add milk. Pour into greased baking dish and bake at 350 degrees for 45 minutes.

WILD GREEN QUICHE

CRUST:

- 1/2 C. vegetable oil
- 2 T. milk
- 3/4 C. unbleached white flour
- 3/4 C. cornmeal
- 1 T. sage
- 1/2 t. salt
- 1/4 t. pepper

Mix liquids together, then add the dry ingredients. Press into a 10-inch pie pan. Bake 5 minutes in a preheated 425-degree oven

FILLING:

- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 T. vegetable oil
- 1 C. grated cheese
- 2 1/2 C.s washed and chopped wild greens
- 2 eggs
- 2 ounces cottage cheese

Lightly sauté the onion in oil and place in pre-baked pie shell. Add the grated cheese, the dandelion greens. In a blender whiz together the eggs, cottage cheese, salt and pepper. Pour over the greens in the pie shell. Bake at 350 degrees for 35 minutes. Let stand a few minutes before serving. 

