

# Delighting in Wild Greens

It may be a weed, but it might be delicious

BY JOHN N. KALLAS

Every spring, I plant a vegetable garden. But even before I select my seeds, weeds are already flourishing. I turn them under, and they come up again. Many sprout, flower, and fruit before I can harvest any of my garden crops.

So if life gives you dandelions, what do you do? You make dandelion salad, soup, and wine, of course. Treat your weeds like nature's garden of edible delights. In most gardens, about half the weeds are actually tasty, nourishing food.

## A WINDFALL HARVEST

Here's what I do to harvest wild and cultivated plants from late winter through fall. First, in early spring I gather and use whatever edible weeds I find in my garden. Dandelions, thistle, and chickweed can often be found as soon as the snow melts. Then I turn and prepare the soil. I plant my corn, tomatoes, broccoli, peas, and whatever else strikes my fancy.

Almost immediately, the weeds begin to grow. Throughout the growing season, I pull all the inedible weeds and toss them in the compost. I harvest the edible weeds as I need them, starting with those closest to my garden plants. This selective pulling gives the garden plants room to grow. As time goes on, the patches of wild edibles become smaller and smaller. When their number is severely reduced, my garden vegetables are just beginning to produce. I keep one place in my garden exclusively for weeds, however, so that I always have some to eat.

Leaving weeds in the garden is not for the faint of heart. Your spouse may complain about your untidy habits. Your neighbors might think you're slovenly and lazy. But be brave: you'll enjoy fresh, unusual ingredients that will be the envy of all the best cooks in town.

## FIVE EDIBLE WEEDS

The plants that follow are some of the most common weeds in the United States and Canada. They are arranged in order



*Chickweed makes a delicate salad green. Or use it in sandwiches, as you would alfalfa sprouts.*

of harvest. A cautionary note: don't pick wild plants for food in an area that has been sprayed with pesticides or herbicides, anywhere close to the driveway or road, or in any other questionable location.

**Chickweed (*Stellaria media*)**—Chickweed, like dandelions, can grow virtually all year round in moderate climates. It's a small plant with tiny leaves and flowers that grows in and around gardens, among shrubs, and in lawns. Here are two ways to identify the weed: First, if you look closely, you can see a narrow line of short hairs running up each stem, sort of like a miniature Mohawk haircut. Second, if you look carefully at the tiny white flower, you'll see that what looks like ten petals is really five, so deeply split that they look like rabbit ears.

Delicate in flavor and texture, chickweed doesn't hold up to cooking, but it's an excellent mild salad green. I use chickweed leaves and young stems just like alfalfa sprouts in salads and on sandwiches.

For a continuous supply all spring, I harvest only the young growing leaves and stem ends. As each plant sends up new growths from the previously trimmed stems, I pick them. The older parts of the stems are stringy.

**Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)**—Many foragers suggest that you pick only the earliest spring dandelion leaves (before the plant flowers) because the greens become bitter with age.

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# Wild greens with a French accent

BY GREG HIGGINS

At my restaurant in Portland, Oregon, I try to cook food that offers what the French call *goût de terroir*—the flavor of the region. Wild foods such as the many types of greens, mushrooms, tubers, and shoots that grow in the Pacific Northwest and other regions of the country are delicious, and they add a special regional character to my food. Using ingredients grown or foraged locally means that the food is fresh and at its peak. It's also part of the wise use of our agricultural resources.

## **SALMON WITH SHEEP SORREL SAUCE & DUMPLINGS**

You can use French sorrel if the wild greens aren't available. I recommend a Chardonnay that isn't too oaky or a Pinot Gris. *Serves six.*

*6 skinless salmon fillets, 5 oz. each  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper*

### **FOR THE DUMPLINGS:**

*1 lb. russet potatoes, preferably Yukon Gold, unpeeled, scrubbed  
4 oz. sheep sorrel (or French sorrel) leaves (about 5 cups, lightly packed)  
¼ cup olive oil  
3 egg yolks  
½ cup semolina  
½ cup flour  
½ cup fine fresh breadcrumbs  
¼ tsp. grated fresh nutmeg  
2 tsp. salt, more to taste  
Freshly ground black pepper*

### **FOR THE SAUCE:**

*3 cups fish stock (or 2 cups bottled clam juice and 1 cup water)  
2 Tbs. minced shallot  
1 tsp. minced garlic  
6 oz. sheep sorrel (or French sorrel) leaves (about 7 cups, lightly packed)  
½ cup extra-virgin olive oil  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper*

**For the dumplings**—Simmer the whole potatoes in lightly salted water until tender enough to allow a knife point to easily penetrate to the center. Drain and cool slightly.

Blanch the sorrel in boiling water for a few seconds and refresh in cold water. Drain thoroughly and press out excess moisture. In a food processor or blender, purée the sorrel with the olive oil and egg yolks.

Cut the potatoes into smaller pieces and pass them through a food mill or a ricer (the skins will stay behind) into a mixing bowl. Add the semolina, flour, breadcrumbs, puréed sorrel, nutmeg, salt, and pepper to taste. Knead the mixture lightly until it comes together to make an even dough. Cover the bowl with a towel and let rest for 30 min.

Lightly flour your hands and the work surface. Divide the dough into a few pieces and roll each piece into a ¾-in. rope. Cut the ropes into 2-in. pieces. Roll the ends of each piece to taper them and make football-shaped dumplings.

Cook the dumplings in a large pot of boiling salted water until they float to the top and feel firm, about 4 min. Remove with a slotted spoon, drain, and toss with a little oil to prevent sticking. Use immediately or refrigerate.

**For the sauce**—Combine the fish stock, shallots, and garlic in a small, nonreactive saucepan and simmer until reduced to about ⅔ cup. Put the sorrel leaves into the bowl of a food processor, add the hot stock reduction, and process about 30 seconds. With the motor running, gradually add the olive oil and salt and pepper to taste. Keep warm until ready to serve. The sauce may separate on standing, so whisk it well before serving.

**To finish the dish**—Run your finger over the salmon fillets to find any pin bones and pull them out with tweezers or by pinching them between your finger and a knife. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Set up a steamer (or a large pot fitted with a rack), bring the water to a boil, put in the fish, cover, and steam until just barely done in the center, 5 to 10 min., depending on the shape of the fillet.

Meanwhile, sauté the dumplings in a little oil or butter in a nonstick pan over medium-high heat until they're heated through and slightly browned. Ladle some warm sauce on each plate, arrange a few dumplings on one side and a salmon fillet on the other. Decorate with more greens, if you like, and serve immediately.

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Greg Higgins cooked in Alsace and Burgundy before moving to Oregon, where he was the executive chef of the Heathman Hotel for nearly a decade. He recently opened his own restaurant, Higgins, in downtown Portland.

Well, frankly, I don't care how early I pick them—they're always bitter; they just get more so with time. If you like bitter greens, then try the young leaves raw as a salad. A basic oil-and-vinegar dressing helps to calm the bitterness. If you have only a moderate tolerance for bitter flavors, you can cut early greens crosswise into narrow strips and sprinkle them onto a salad of milder greens, such as chickweed, lamb's quarters, or amaranth. Used sparingly, dandelion greens add punch but won't overwhelm. Boiling or sautéing makes the greens less bitter so that they can be used like cooked spinach.

Dandelion flowers make an excellent addition to soups. They can also serve as an attractive garnish and can be eaten out of hand. Many children love to pick and eat them. Be careful to avoid the green bracts that surround the base of the flower, since they are extremely bitter. Dandelion wine is made from the flowers. For a good wine recipe, check Euell Gibbons' *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* (see the sidebar opposite).

**Bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*)**—This unlikely wild edible is flavorful in spite of its ominous spines. Bull thistle is a biennial, which means it takes two years to complete its growth cycle. The first year that it grows from seed, it sends down a carrot-like taproot and sprouts a set of leaves. The second year, it grows rapidly from its taproot into a four- to six-foot plant with stalks that bear both leaves and purple flowers.

I collect the young first-year leaves and boil them for only a few minutes, enough to soften their spines. If the spines remain stiff after five minutes of boiling, I know the leaves are too old to eat. This plant gets increasingly fibrous, bitter, and stiff-spined with age. Because of the spines and hairs, I don't suggest you eat the leaves raw, regardless of age.

The first-year taproot is entirely edible and makes an excellent cooked vegetable. By early spring of the second year, when the plant begins sending up its flowering stalks, the taproot is too hard and fibrous to eat. Unless you want seed, don't let bull thistle grow to maturity the second year, because it will draw nutrients and water from other plants.

**Sheep sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*)**—Closely related to French sorrel (*Rumex scutatus*), which many people plant in their gardens, sheep sorrel is a small plant ranging from five to ten inches tall. Its leaves are shaped like long arrowheads, and the plant often has a reddish tinge, particularly when it reaches the flowering stage. Leaves vary in size from three-quarters of an inch to about two inches long, and they never seem to become fibrous.



*Dandelion's leaves and flowers are both edible. The bitter leaves add punch to a salad; they're also good cooked like spinach.*

The leaf of this plant has a vinegary, lemony flavor that makes it an excellent trail nibble, a good addition to soup, and a fine salad green (see recipes on p. 55). Because of their lemony flavor, sheep sorrel leaves (either fresh or dried) make an excellent herbal seasoning for meat, poultry, and fish. I lay fresh leaves on the food before cooking or sprinkle dried leaves over the surface. The dried leaves also make a good tea.

**Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*)**—Purslane is a succulent, persistent groundcover. Its reddish stems resemble networks of miniature pipes running along the ground. The green leaves are tear-shaped and thick.

*Bull thistle offers edible leaves, which need boiling to soften, and a carrot-like taproot.*





*Sheep sorrel has the same lemony flavor as French sorrel.*

I use the whole aboveground plant when young, though the youngest stems are the choicest morsels. Purslane is excellent as a salad green and as an addition to soups and stews. The slightly slimy mouth-feel (similar to okra) of the raw plant may turn some people off, but the mild vinegary flavor is pleasant. The fresh green leaves and reddish stems make a pretty garnish for the dinner plate. Purslane is relatively high in iron and omega-3 fatty acids.

#### PLAY IT SAFE

A few basic rules apply to gathering and eating any wild food:

- ◆ Because some poisonous plants look like edible ones, correct identification is essential. The photographs in this article will help, but there is

no substitute for having someone who really knows plants identify them for you until you're familiar with them. In some areas, you can take plants to your state's cooperative extension service for identification. Field guides can help if they have excellent photographs and drawings.

- ◆ Some plants have both edible and poisonous parts, and so you must know which parts can be eaten. The tomato is a good example of this principle in a domesticated plant: the fruit of the tomato is the only part of the plant that isn't poisonous. Buy a couple of books on wild edible plants and try only those parts that are mentioned as safe to eat. You'll

*Purslane's tart flavor works in salads, soups, and stews.*



#### FOR FURTHER READING

*Selected Weeds of the United States*. Agricultural Handbook No. 366, ARS, USDA Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970.

*Handbook of Edible Weeds*, by James Duke. CRC Press, Inc., Boca Raton, FL, 1992.

*A Field Guide to Edible Wild Plants (Eastern/Central North America)*, by Lee Allen. Guide #23. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, MA, 1977.

*Nature Bound Pocket Field Guide*, by Ron Dawson. OMNIgraphics Ltd., Boise, ID, 1985.

*Stalking the Wild Asparagus*, by Euell Gibbons. David McKay Co., Inc., New York, NY, 1962.

*Wild Edible Plants of the Western United States*, by Donald Kirk. Color edition. Naturegraph Publishers Inc., Healdsburg, CA, 1975.

be happy to know that no part of any of the plants described in this article is poisonous.

- ◆ Know the season or stage when the plants should be picked. Some fruits are poisonous until ripe. Others become poisonous, fibrous, or bitter with age.

- ◆ Learn the minimum preparation required to make the plant edible or palatable. Many wild foods can be eaten raw, but some need cooking or other processing.

- ◆ Whenever you try any food for the first time, you run the risk of a reaction. In rare cases, the weeds listed in this article may cause mild gas or a queasy stomach. People with food allergies should be as cautious as they are with any new food, particularly if it contains pollen.

- ◆ If you plan to study wild foods, you should look up each one and refer to it by the Latin name. The unique plant name will reduce your chances of confusing species that have the same moniker. For instance, both wild carrot and poison hemlock are called Queen Anne's lace. I certainly wouldn't want to get these two plants mixed up.

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