

HOME-GARDEN

Beyond the vegetable garden: Edible native plants to discover this year

Mark Richardson Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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The first plant I taught each of my three kids to identify was poison ivy. Making sure they knew how to avoid a plant that can cause such discomfort was important to me as a parent. Although they always spent a lot of time outdoors with me, my two older boys never showed any interest in identifying other plants. Knowing how to avoid poison ivy was enough, but if I tried to teach them about plants we found on walks, I usually got an eye roll. My daughter, on the other hand, wants to know everything about plants. It's been great fun for me to teach her some of my favorites, from sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*) — she loves that its leaves sometimes look like mittens and sometimes look like dinosaur footprints — to American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*), she loves to learn characteristics that help her identify plants in different seasons.

Like a lot of people who first find themselves interested in plants, my daughter especially loves to learn about plants she can eat. In our garden, she loves mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*) and frequently hands me a leaf or two to chew on when I get home from work. She also loves to scratch and sniff spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) twigs. As much as I love her enthusiasm, I've been careful to emphasize the importance of only eating a plant after she's checked with me and knows for certain it's safe. The same advice is key for anyone who is interested in sampling a little of the tasty edible native plants around them.

In our region, there are a lot of edible native plants found beyond the boundaries of the vegetable garden. If you know what to look for, a walk in the woods — even in winter — can be a great way to sample some tasty fruits, nuts, twigs and leaves. You can also integrate these terrific plants into your yard or garden.

Spicebush is a great native shrub that's common in low-lying wetland margins. Though not a traditional edible plant, it's one of the few you can enjoy in winter, and it's somewhat easy to identify thanks to rounded flower buds at the tips of its branches that open to yellow flowers

in early spring. Spicebush twigs are quite fragrant, especially when the bark is scraped with a fingernail. Steeped in boiling water for about 10 minutes, spicebush twigs make a flavorful, citrusy tea that can be enjoyed any time of year. Similarly, sweet birch (*Betula lenta*) twigs taste minty. They're great to simply chew on, but steeped in boiling water, make a mildly flavorful tea.

After the long winter, one of my favorite edible native plants emerges. Ramps or wild leek (*Allium tricoccum*) is an onion that produces tasty edible leaves in spring, followed by small white flower clusters in June and July. Tastier than scallions, ramps were once commonly found throughout New England. Unfortunately, over-harvesting and loss of habitat has led to a steep decline in wild populations. You can help conservation efforts by growing (and harvesting) ramps in your garden, or only harvesting leaves, leaving bulbs behind to continue to multiply.

Another spring favorite is ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*), also known as fiddlehead fern. All ferns produce fiddleheads, a term describing the appearance of fern fronds as they unfurl. The only edible fiddleheads are produced by our native ostrich fern. Fiddleheads must be harvested at the right stage and prepared properly before eating.

Fruit-producing plants like highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) are a summer highlight and usually easy to spot. Highbush blueberry is a tall shrub commonly found in our area growing on wetland margins, bearing fruit in mid- to late-summer. It's quite common and easy enough to find when it bears fruit, and fortunately, there are not a lot of plants it can be confused with.

Before you start foraging for some of these edible native plants, be sure to learn more about plant identification to avoid eating anything poisonous. At New England Botanic Garden, we demonstrate how some of these plants can be incorporated into garden beds because growing them at home is the best way to ensure what you're eating is safe. At home, you can enjoy these plants both for their beauty and their flavor!

Gardening Central Mass. is written by New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Mark Richardson. Located on 171 acres in Boylston. New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at www.nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.