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Edibles in the Park

[Fit Magazine](#)

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By "Wildman" Steve Brill

Find out how to forage for health, fun, and a fresh connection with nature.



As we develop our inner awareness, many of us also begin to focus outward, toward our natural surroundings. If you look closely, you'll find that the same wild foods and medicinal plants that sustained our ancestors now grow in our backyards, suburban woodlots, and urban parks. Wild and edible plants are packed with nutrients and flavor, and the act of foraging not only increases our health and fitness, it helps us make a personal connection to the earth.

The wise forager

Identify any plant you're going to eat or use for home remedies with 100% certainty. Some, such as the ones below, are easy to recognize, while others have poisonous look-alikes. Thoroughly learn about a few species, and track them through the seasons before adding more plants to your foraging. Collect away from obvious pollution, such as busy streets, railroad rights-of-way, or sprayed fields. Gather renewable species where they're very common, only take a fraction of the plants, and leave the roots intact, unless you're harvesting roots.

Here are a few safe, common, widespread, easy-to-recognize species:

CURLY DOCK, YELLOW DOCK, (*Rumex crispus*)



Long, lance-shaped, hairless leaves with very wavy margins radiating from a common center in early spring makes this species distinct. In mid-spring, curly dock grows one- to five-foot tall spikes encircled by dense clusters of tiny, inconspicuous, green flowers, giving way to dense clusters of hard, reddish fruit. It grows in fields, on disturbed soil, along roadsides, and near the seashore.



The highly nutritious, lemony flavored young leaves are excellent raw or cooked in early spring, as are the leaves on the flower stalk and the peeled flower stalk in mid-spring. People boil the long yellow taproot and drink the bitter tea to detoxify and to help liver or skin ailments.

(Use your common sense and if you have any concerns about what you forage, contact a professional at your local cooperative extension hot line or sign up with a [tour](#) with Steve Brill.)

Imam

MULBERRY (*Morus species*)



This medium-sized tree has oval, serrated leaves sometimes partially divided into lobes. In late spring or early summer, thousands of dark purple, white, or pink (depending on species) soft, sticky, ripe berries make a big mess on the sidewalks, fields, or roadsides. They look like elongated blackberries (which are stalkless, thorny bushes) hanging from a short, slender stalk. Shake the branches over a drop cloth and harvest a bonanza. Discard debris, rinse, and add to any berry recipe, along with some lemon juice for tartness; or freeze for future months.



[Mulberry-Papaya Salad](#)

HEN-OF-THE-WOODS MUSHROOM

(Grifola frondosa)



Not a plant but a fungus, hen-of-the-woods belongs to the family of polypore mushrooms, which are shelf shaped, grow on wood (on which the fungus feeds), and have many tiny holes (pores) underneath their caps.

The clustered, overlapping grayish-brown, lateral spoon- or fan-shaped caps grow three-quarters of an inch to 2-3/4 inches wide, arising from short white stalks that branch from the base. The surface of the tiny pores under the caps is whitish. The spores, which you can collect on paper under a bowl, are also white. With no poisonous look-alikes, hen-of-the-woods grows on the base of oak trees in autumn.

[Sesame Hen](#)

Naturalist-author "Wildman" Steve Brill has led [foraging tours](#) in parks throughout Greater NY since 1982. His books include [Identifying and Harvesting Edible and Medicinal Plants in Wild \(and Not-So-Wild\) Places](#) (William Morrow Publishers, 1994) and [The Wild Vegetarian Cookbook](#) (Harvard Common Press, 2002). His [Foraging With the "Wildman" video series](#) shows how it's done.

Steve lives in Mamaroneck, NY, with his wife Leslie-Anne and his 2-year-old daughter [Violet](#), but he's still best known for having been [handcuffed](#) and [arrested](#) by [undercover park rangers](#) for eating a [dandelion](#) in Central Park!

To learn more, visit <http://www.wildmanstevebrill.com>

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