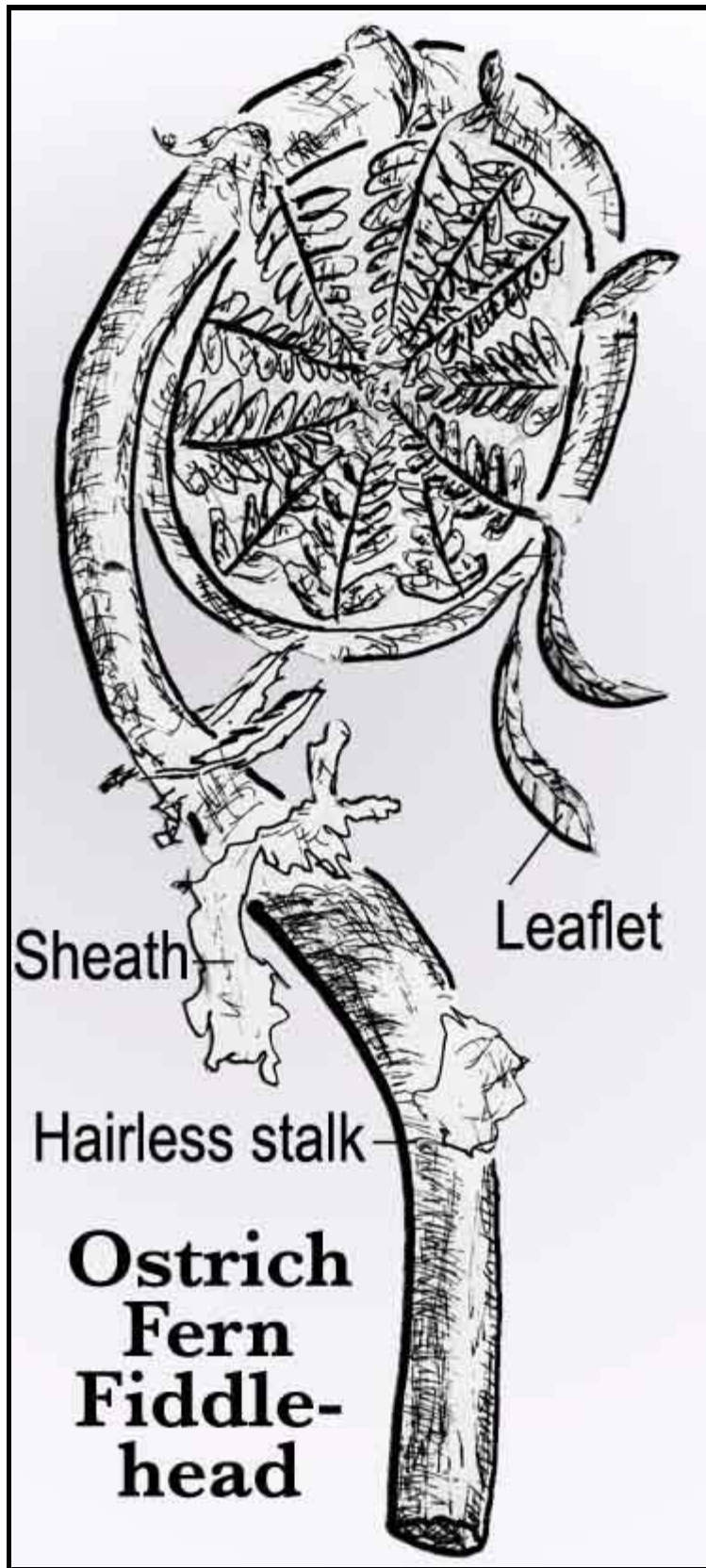


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Ostrich Fern
(Matteuccia Pennsylvanica)



From *SHOOTS AND GREENS*
OF EARLY SPRING
in Northeastern North America



DESCRIPTION: This large, unbranched, curved, feathery fern, 2 to 6 feet tall, resembles an ostrich's tail, with 1 central stem per frond, and toothed (serrated)

leaflets.



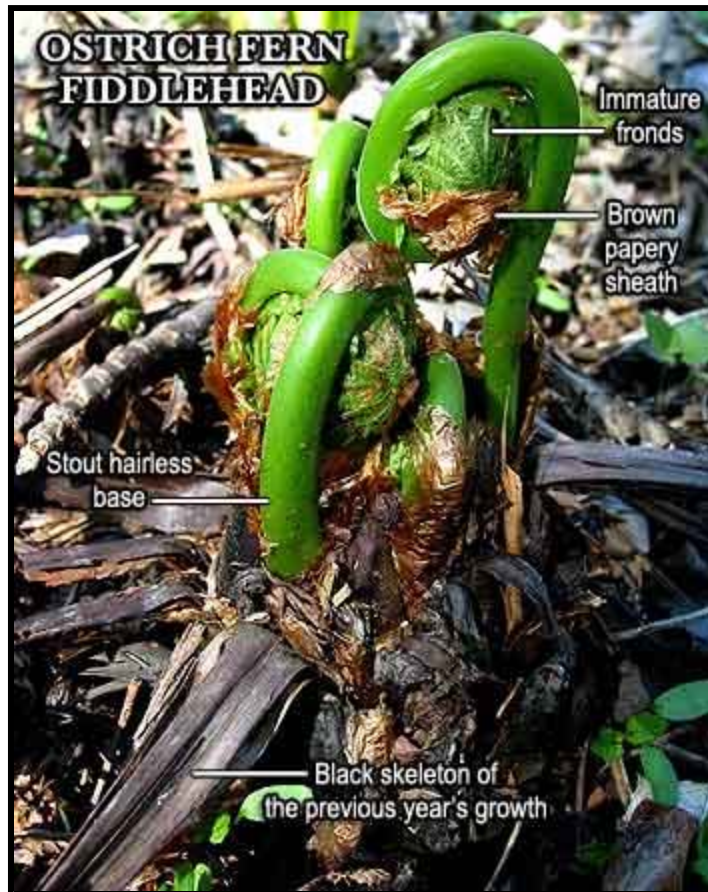
Inside a vase-shaped bunch of conspicuous, sterile fronds, you'll find the smaller fertile or fruiting fronds, up to 2 feet tall, that look like birdsí tails, with dense, dark brown feathers.

The emerging fern first takes the form of a fiddleheadó tightly rolled up to resemble the curved, narrow end of a violin, with a stout base tapering upward. A papery, scaly sheath wraps this *hairless*, emerald-green vegetable, which varies in height as it grows. Fiddleheads of other ferns wonít kill you, but theyíre not tasty and are often too hairy to eat; brackenÝ (*Pteridium aquilinum*), a favorite in Japan that appears in mid-spring, contains carcinogens.

Caution: Some deadly plants, such as poison hemlockÝ (*Conium maculatum*) and water hemlockÝ (*Cicuta maculata*), may look like shopping mall ferns to the novice. However, the poisonousÝ plants lack the ostrich fernís distinctive fiddlehead.

HABITAT: Ostrich ferns grow in moist areas in partial shade. Although I've never found them in New York City, they grow in swamps in the surrounding suburbs and countryside.

FOOD USES: Fiddleheads are a much sought-after vegetable, especially among the Japanese. Their delicate flavor (donít overseason) lies somewhere between asparagusÝ and snap peas).



Rub off the scaly membrane under running water, then steam, simmer, or sauté for 5 to 10 minutes. Serve with a sauce or they'll be somewhat dry.

Unlike most other wild vegetables, fiddleheads don't grow back when you pick them. Be sure you collect only where very abundant, and take no more than half the fiddleheads from any single bunch to avoid depleting the rhizomes (underground stems) of nutrients.

NUTRITION: Ostrich fern fiddleheads provide lots of vitamin A and niacin, some vitamin C, the minerals potassium, phosphorus, magnesium, and iron, and the trace minerals manganese, zinc, and copper.

MEDICINAL USES: Tests have come up with no distinct biochemical activities for this plant.

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