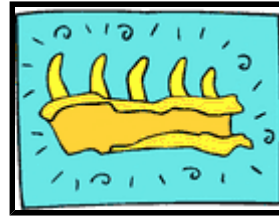


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SINK YOUR TEETH INTO FORAGING

*A leading naturalist tells you how to find incredible edibles
right in your own backyard*



[VEGETARIAN TIMES MAGAZINE](#)

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tip

Scared to start chomping on the unknown? Look for [lamb's-quarters](#), [purslane](#) and wild arugula (another foraging favorite) at farmers' markets so you can see (and taste) before you scavenge the fields.

I live in New York and I eat weeds. What's more, I make my living teaching other people how to find safe ones to eat. Okay, okay, I'm a naturalist who specializes in edible, medicinal wild [plants](#). I lead [tours](#) throughout greater New York for the public and for [schools](#), [day camps](#) and museums. I show people how to forage: to recognize, ecologically harvest and use our most overlooked renewable resources-the wild foods that nourished our ancestors for thousands of years.

Our surroundings are overgrown with edible herbs, greens, berries, roots, nuts, seeds and [mushrooms](#), which survive the herbivores who dine on them by prolifically reproducing—so much so that people incorrectly identify them as "weeds." Although certain wild plants are poisonous, there are plenty of edibles that are easy to recognize, tastier than anything you buy, supernutritious and just plain fun to gather and cook with.

If you want to build a salad out of ingredients from your own backyard, there are just three basics to keep in mind: To forage safely, you'll need to identify anything you want to eat with 100 percent certainty. Avoid collecting in areas sprayed with chemicals, along railroad tracks and within 50 feet of highways. Harvest the plants only where they're abundant, and even then, take only a small portion.

The following three common greens are ideal for first-time foragers. After you're comfortable gathering them, you can gradually add more wild plants to your dinner plate.



Mouse-ear Chickweed Flower

[COMMON CHICKWEED \(*STELLARIA MEDIA*\)](#)
[AND STAR CHICKWEED \(*STELLARIA PUBERA*\)](#)

What they look like Both varieties are delicate plants that either trail the ground or form mats 3 to 8 inches tall. Smooth-edged, spade-shaped leaves 1/2 to 1 inch long grow in pairs along a slender stem that features a fine row of tiny hairs. The tiny flowers have five white petals (though they're split so they look like 10), lined with five green sepals (petal-like leaves just below the petals). Leaves on common chickweed have short stalks; those on star chickweed don't. Safety test: Snap a stem to see if it's dry—if milky sap runs out, toss it.

Where to find them Both varieties grow in sunny areas, such as lawns and meadows, as well as in partial shade. They taste best and are most abundant in the early spring and late fall, but chickweeds are in season all year; they even grow during winter warm spells.

How to eat them Raw star and common chickweed taste like fresh corn; when cooked, somewhat like spinach. To cook, just steam, simmer or sauté 5 to 10 minutes.

Healthful properties Herbalists prescribed chickweed to convalescents for centuries, and with justification. It's loaded with vitamins B6, B12, C and D, plus beta-carotene, iron, calcium, potassium, zinc, phosphorus and manganese. Chickweed was also fed to people with tuberculosis, anemia, arthritis and malnutrition. Modern herbalists use chickweed tea as a diuretic (to relieve water retention) or to cleanse the urinary tract. To make tea, steep 1 to 2 Tbs. fresh chickweed covered in 1 cup boiled water for 20 minutes.



[Lamb's-quarters](#)

[LAMB'S-QUARTERS](#) (*CHENOPODIUM ALBUM*)

What it looks like This nonwoody plant branches like a tree, reaching 3 to 5 (sometimes up to 10) feet tall. Its diamond-shaped single leaves (they don't grow in clusters) have

wavy edges and grow up to 4 inches long. The undersides of the leaves look like they've been dusted with white powder. Long clusters of tiny, inconspicuous, spherical, green flowers hang from the upper branches in summer and fall; in autumn they turn reddish-brown and develop thousands of small, shiny black seeds. Safety test: Pick a handful and inhale deeply. Lamb's-quarters has virtually no odor (unlike *Teloxys* spp., which is superficially similar but smells rank and may be poisonous if eaten in quantity).

Where to find it You'll find lamb's-quarters growing in backyards, vacant lots, overgrown fields, urban parks, along roadsides and near the ocean.

How to eat it The plant tastes like its relative, spinach, only better (the seeds are also edible, albeit labor intensive to collect). You can eat the whole tender young plant in mid-spring; use just the leaves from late spring to fall. Use it the same way you'd use spinach: Toss it in salads, soups, quiches and casseroles.

Healthful properties Lamb's-quarters provide more beta carotene, calcium, potassium and iron than spinach, and it's also an excellent source of vitamin C and B vitamins.



[Purslane](#)

[PURSLANE](#) (*PORTULACA OLERACEA*)

What it looks like Purslane's paddle-shaped leaves are 1/2 to 2 inches long and lack leaf stalks. The stems are smooth, branched, reddish, 4 to 10 inches long and filled with water. Snap a stem; if there's white, milky sap inside, discard it (you may have picked spurge, a poisonous plant that grows in similar conditions to purslane). You have to look carefully to notice the tiny, yellow, five-petaled flowers of late summer and fall—they're only 1/5 inch wide. When the flower dies, its base enlarges to become a capsule full of minuscule black seeds that you could theoretically grind into a nutritious flour if it weren't so time consuming to collect enough seeds.

Where to find it Purslane grows from late spring to fall on sunny lawns and meadows, but can also be found growing in partial shade.

How to eat it The sweet-and sour stems and leaves are good in salads or cooked as a side dish (steam, simmer or sauté 5 to 10 minutes). Use chopped purslane as a thickening agent in soups (like okra). The stems make excellent mini-pickles.

Healthful properties Purslane is a terrific plant source of heart-friendly omega-3 fatty acids and iron. It is also high in vitamin C; and contains some beta-carotene and calcium. Surprisingly, herbalists have only recently picked up on this herb's benefits.

[Creamy Cashew Salad Dressing](#)

One final warning about the greatest danger of foraged foods: Once you have trained your eyes to spot these wild greens-and have brought them home and tasted the fruits of your labor-you'll find yourself unable to stop gazing into your neighbors' backyards and peering at plants on the side of the road. That's when you know foraging truly has you in its grip, and it won't be long before you're out scavenging for salad again.

CONTRIBUTORS

Naturalist and author "Wildman" Steve Brill ("Sink Your Teeth Into Foraging," p. 58) has been leading [foraging tours](#) in parks throughout New York since 1982.

He made headlines in 1986 when he was [handcuffed](#) and [arrested](#) for eating a dandelion during an unofficial tour in Central Park. "They couldn't keep me very long," Steve laughs. "I'd eaten all the evidence." His tours are now sanctioned by park officials.

When he's not scavenging in parks or developing recipes (such as those in his [Wild Vegetarian Cookbook](#)), Steve teaches his three-year-old daughter [Violet](#) about wild plants. "She's already learned so much," he says. "If anyone ever transforms her into a cow, she'll know what to eat!" ["Wildman's note: This is an out-of-context reference to story I tell about the Greek mythological Violet.]

EDITOR'S NOTE

Sharing

Finally, there's "Wildman" Steve Brill, an enthusiastic forager who tells you how to find three edible plants right in your own backyard ("Sink Your Teeth into Foraging," p. 58).

I took one of Steve's foraging [tours](#) in Central Park a couple of years ago and can attest to his generosity: In addition to showing us every imaginable comestible growing in the park, he brought along a thermos of homemade vegan ice cream for the group to taste. Turns out, Steve loves to cook, too—and like me, he couldn't help but share.

Mary Margaret Chappell

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