

HAND TO MOUTH

Hedgerow foraging doesn't have to be just an autumnal pastime. Keep your eyes peeled and you'll see there's always something tasty lurking in plain sight. Clare Hunt investigates what's ripe for the picking in May and June

At one time or another, most of us have plucked an irresistibly juicy blackberry, collected plump sloes to steep in gin or ventured to pick a field mushroom or two. But this is just the tip of the foraging iceberg. All around, in hedgerows and woodlands, parks and gardens, an abundance of edible plants, fruit and flowers go unpicked because we don't know they're there, we don't know what they are and, truthfully, we're a bit scared of eating something we shouldn't.

With supermarkets providing an overwhelming selection of foods, we've lost the inclination to seek out, collect and eat wild food. So why should we? James Feaver from Hedgerow Harvest sums it up: "Foraging is a pleasurable experience; the finding, gathering and then cooking of a wonderful dish where you have provided the main ingredients gives a great sense of achievement. Foraging improves our understanding and appreciation of the natural environment and helps us value

the countryside... this is part of our national heritage and should be kept alive."

So where to start? Foraging doyen, author and River Cottage expert John Wright is a firm believer in putting in the groundwork: "Get out the books, research what's in season, where it grows and how to identify it." John strongly discourages picking anything on the off-chance then chucking it away upon the realisation that it's inedible or, worse, deadly poisonous. An excellent way to kick-start a foraging habit is to take a guided walk with an expert, to build confidence and get your eye in.

Before getting started there are some basic dos and don'ts to observe: while accurate identification is critical, so is foraging legally and sensitively. Make sure you have a landowner's permission if you're on private land. On rights of way (where you

Stinging nettles

As Fraser Christian from Coastal Survival says, "if you're new to foraging, no need to make mistakes: start with stinging nettles – hard to misidentify and packed full of goodness." In May the tips are tender, ideal in soups, as a side dish or made into a pesto-type sauce.



Wild garlic

With its pungent aroma, wild garlic readily advertises its whereabouts. Use the leaves in soups, garlic bread, pasta sauces and stir-fries. The seed heads make a crunchy garnish.



An excellent way to kick-start a foraging habit is to take a guided walk with an expert

may gather wild food for your own consumption) don't uproot, remove or destroy plants and remember that some areas (eg National Trust or MOD property) may have by-laws concerning

foraging. Pollution is a vital consideration, so avoid hedgerows on busy roads and be careful along field boundaries where pesticides and herbicides may drift. For obvious reasons >

Wild gooseberries and wild strawberries

It's the lucky forager who stumbles upon these tiny, delectable berries before the birds do. Wild gooseberries advertise themselves to the eagle-eyed by being the first hedgerow plant to bud in spring.

Pig nuts

A member of the carrot family, pig nuts are most easily identified in spring and early summer, after which the leaves die back and they're virtually impossible to find. Though small, the crunchy nuts are tasty and can be eaten raw or added to soups and stews. Because they must be dug up, it's vital to have the landowner's permission before you forage for them.



Wild rocket

Now a staple in the British salad bowl, cultivated rocket will have its socks knocked off by the flavour of its wild cousin, which is at its prime in May and June.

Elderflower

Used in drinks, desserts and cakes, pick these distinctive blossoms when all the florets are open with a yellow centre and before the tiny white flowers start to drop off. Elderflower on the turn has an unsavoury cat-pee smell so should definitely be avoided.

Dandelion flowers

Derided as a weed, sweet dandelion flowers can add texture to salads, be baked into biscuits, and made into syrup or wine.



avoid picking low-growing plants on popular dog-walking routes and always thoroughly wash what you pick, just in case. Don't strip plants bare, leaving nothing for wildlife or other foragers and only pick when a plant is bountiful. Avoid heavy-footed trampling when you're gathering – innocent, inedible plants can become collateral damage.

With spring turning to summer, May and June are excellent

Fat hen

A plant you'll definitely have seen and most probably have cursed as a prolific weed, fat hen is versatile and iron-rich – use it anywhere you would spinach.

months for gathering vitamin-rich tender leaves. 'Salad' plants are plentiful and you could even stumble upon some of the year's first soft fruits. So pack up your field guide and don some sturdy gloves, it's time to go foraging.

For further information and details of guided forays, visit: hedgerow-harvest.com wild-food.net coastalsurvival.com

**Sweet cicely**

Commonly mistaken for cow parsley, sweet cicely has a strong aniseed scent – just rub the leaves to release the aroma. An ideal sugar substitute, it's a perfect match for early rhubarb.

Hairy bittercress

It sounds unappetising and is considered a weed, but hairy bittercress lends tang to an egg sandwich or salad and a rockety punch to pesto.