

Foraging

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“Foraging” refers to the gathering of wild edibles for food to grace our table. Historically, the human race began as hunter-gatherers, gleaning food from what was found, not raised. With the growing interest in fresh and local, there has been a resurgence of interest in foraging for wild food.

Morel mushrooms have always had an avid fan base, with hunters jealously guarding the locations of their most lucrative hunting spots. There is a reason for this, with sales of morels netting \$20 per pound and more. Similarly, the locations of wild asparagus are closely guarded secrets. My brother keeps a list of spots where he finds wild asparagus so he can be sure to harvest the delectable spears in spring. Dandelion leaves, while never hard to find, make a nutritious early season salad.

Along with enthusiasm for gathering wild edibles must come the knowledge of what is edible and what is not. Upon learning berries gathered were from pokeweed (poisonous) and not chokecherry (edible), a client rushed out the door saying she needed to retrieve all the jars of jelly she had given away to friends and family. Another client complained the rhubarb jam she made from “wild” rhubarb just didn’t taste right and was surprised to learn the stalks she was using for her jam came from the weed burdock. While burdock isn’t poisonous, doing the research or seeking confirmation from a knowledgeable person helps to avoid these kind of mistakes.

Foraging is generational, when hard-earned knowledge gleaned by a past generation is passed on to the next. This knowledge isn’t just about recognizing plants but also how to correctly prepare them for eating. Think about cashews, which aren’t native here but are closely related to the native plant poison ivy, and how the knowledge of preparing cashews changes them from something poisonous into an edible.

I grew up in a family that gathered wild plum, wild grape, chokecherry, wild raspberry, walnuts, morel mushrooms, and dandelion greens. The experience was a good teacher, underscoring an appreciation for what nature provides but also a healthy respect for what should be avoided. Especially with mushrooms, never guess or come to the conclusion “this is close enough” because the web site or book you’re referencing appears to confirm your thoughts. Antidotes for some toxins, such as poisonous mushrooms and other fungi, don’t exist. If a plant has been misidentified, emergency room staff have little to go on when treating symptoms. When foraging, it’s important to learn from someone knowledgeable about such things.