



# Food for Free

the complete guide to help you safely identify edible species that grow around us, together with detailed artwork, photographs, field identification notes and recipes.

Richard Mabey





# Food for Free

Richard Mabey



Collins

# For My Mother

## About the author

Richard Mabey is the author of some forty books, including the best-selling *Flora Britannica*, *Weeds and Nature Cure*, which was short-listed for the Whitbread, Ondaatje and Ackerley awards. His biography *Gilbert White* won the Whitbread Biography Prize in 1986. He is a regular broadcaster on BBC radio, writes regularly for the *Guardian*, *New Statesman* and *Granta*, and has contributed a personal column to *BBC Wildlife* for the past 25 years. He is Patron of the John Clare Society, and Vice-President of the Open Spaces Society. He lives in Norfolk.

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# Contents

Preface to the new edition	6
Introduction	13
Some picking rules	19
Edible Plants	22
Trees	28
Herbaceous Plants	86
Fungi	318
Lichens	404
Seaweeds	408
Shellfish	424
Glossary of species	440
Glossary of terms	457
Sources, references and further reading	458
Index	460
Photograph and illustration credits	464

## Preface to the new edition

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In 2010, René Redzepi's Copenhagen restaurant Noma, whose reputation rests on its innovative use of an extraordinary range of wild ingredients, was judged to be the best eatery in the world in an annual poll of food professionals. It was a milestone in the foraging renaissance, but also a sign of the times. It would be hard to find a serious restaurant these days that doesn't feature wild food on its menu. Marsh samphire, chanterelles, wild garlic, dandelion leaves, elderberries, have all become routine ingredients. And increasingly wildings are marshalled into the exotic presentations of the new cuisine. Snails on moss. Haws conjured into ketchup. Cep cappuccino. Sea-buckthorn-berry gel. A whole infrastructure of professional pickers has evolved to service the fashion, and portfolios of television series to popularize it. Wild food has gone mainstream.

How times have changed. When the first edition of *Food for Free* was published in 1972, foraging was still regarded as mildly eccentric. To the extent that it was a new (or revived) tradition, it seemed part of the counter-culture, not the food business. It was a natural outgrowth of the idealism of the 60s, and its roots were firmly anchored in the burgeoning interests in ecology and food quality. I have a snapshot of myself taken around the time the book was published. I'm sitting cross-legged on the lawn in a kaftan, looking rather smug, and cradling an immense puffball on my lap. What the picture reminds me of, forty years on, is that foraging for wild food then didn't feel much like an exploration of some ancient rural heritage (though of course it was). It felt political, cheeky, hedge-wise, a poke in the eye for domesticity as much as domestication. It was only later that I began to appreciate that it might also be a way – on all kinds of social and cultural and psychological levels – of 'reconnecting with the wild'.

But if you were to look at it sceptically, the growing popularity of wild food could seem like a shift in the opposite direction, not so much connecting ourselves with the wild, as domesticating the feral. The seriously intellectual Oxford Food Symposium devoted its annual conference to wild food in 2004. There were learned papers on foraging customs in south-west France and on 'Wild food in the Talmud', and a tasting of 'The feral oils of Australia'. Here in the UK local authorities lay on guided forays in their country parks. New Forest fungi are on sale in supermarkets. The seeds of wild vegetables such as alexanders are available commercially, so you can germinate the wilderness in a window box. The fashionable rise of wild foods is perfectly expressed by the changing fortunes of marsh samphire. In the 60s it was an arcane sea-shore delicacy, a 'poor man's asparagus'. In 1981 it was served at Charles and







Diana's wedding breakfast, gathered fresh from the Crown's own marshes at Sandringham. In the new millennium it's become a garnish for restaurant fish, and a favourite seaside holiday souvenir, sold by the bag to those who don't want to get their own legs mud-plastered, and as a bar-top snack, lightly vinegar-ed and set in bowls next to the crisps and peanuts. Out in the market-place the spirit of the hunter-gatherer seems to be waning.

But out in the countryside it is alive and well, and this strange duality – of avistic foraging coexisting with comfortable eating-out – forces the question *why?* Why should 21st century diners, with most of the taste sensations on the planet effortlessly available to them on a plate, occasionally choose to browse about like Palaeolithics? What are we after? We're opting for the most part for *inconvenience* food, for bramble-scrabbling, mud-larking, tree-climbing. For the painful business of peeling horse-radish and de-husking chestnuts, and the dutiful munching – for historic interest, of course – of the frankly rank ground elder, just because it was bought here as a pot-herb two thousand years ago. It seems a far cry from the duty once spelt out by that Edward Hyams, doyen of plant domestication, 'to leave the fruits of the earth finer than he found them'.

But the inconvenience, the raw uncensored tastes, the necessity of getting physical with the landscape, may be the whole point. The gratifying discomfort of hunting down food the hard way seems genuinely to infuse its savour – even when someone else has done the gathering. As Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Wild Fruit* (1859): 'The bitter-sweet of a white-oak acorn which you nibble in a bleak November walk over the tawny earth is more to me than a slice of imported pine-apple'. Another American forager called this elusive quality 'gatheredness'.

To judge from the hundreds of letters I've been sent over the years, readers understand this. The intimacy with nature that foraging involves isn't seen as pretend primitivism or some misty-eyed nostalgia for the simple life. Rather, it has encouraged a growing awareness of how food fits into the whole living scheme of things, and a curiosity and inventiveness that are every bit as sharp as those of our ancestors. Readers were writing about wild raspberry vinegar long before it became a fashionable ingredient of *nouvelle cuisine*, about the secret sites and local names of the little wild damsons that grow on the Essex borders; about childhood feasts of seaweed 'boiled in burn water and laid on dog roses to dry'. Foreign cuisines, in which wild plants have always been important ingredients, have been brought to bear on our native wildings, and there have been experiments with fruit liqueurs that go way beyond sloe gin: service berries in malt whiskey, cloudberry in aquavit, gin with extra juniper berries.

Some of this innovativeness is even permeating the commercial food trade. A Glasgow brewery uses Argyllshire heather tops to flavour a popular ale sold

as 'leann fraoch'. Nettle leaves wrap Cornish 'Harg' cheese and sloe gins are available in the supermarkets. But it's the new breed of adventurous chefs who are pushing at the boundaries of wild food use and bringing new ingredients into the repertoire, plants (or bits of plants) that may have never been deliberately eaten before: sea-aster (now cultivated commercially), bush vetch, flower pollens (with egg), spruce shoots, hogweed seeds (surprisingly like caradamom).

There has, of course, been a backlash. Some landowners and conservationists are worried that the sheer volume of foraging – especially where it is done professionally for the restaurant trade – may be damaging the populations of wild species: Marsh samphire, for instance, a major wild crop along the north Norfolk coast, but also an important stabiliser of bare mud on unstable shorelines. This is usually yanked straight out of the ground by foragers, root and all, so that the plant (an annual dependent on seeding) is destroyed. But whether samphire gathering, an ancient tradition in this region, happens on a sufficient scale to cause real damage and is therefore in need of controlling is debatable.

It's mushrooming that raises the most serious worries. In a few areas, the widespread picking of fungi, including quite scarce species like cauliflower fungus, has become intense, and amplified by commercial foraging teams. In favoured spots, such as the New Forest and Burnham Beeches, there are now bye-laws prohibiting picking altogether, though this is a contentious matter, since the picked mushroom is merely a fruiting body, not the fungus 'plant' itself.

For myself, I'm not overly worried about the conservation impact of foraging. Almost all orthodox wild foods – leaves, nuts, fruits, even mushrooms – are a renewable resource, and are shed naturally by plants. And the impact of picking on wild vegetation is negligible when you compare it with the destructive effects of modern agriculture. But foraging has other, more subtle, side effects. It competes with the food gathering of wild birds and mammals. In some places it can make a visible impression on the local landscape, and spoil the enjoyment of walkers and naturalists. What we need more than legislation, I believe, is a foraging *etiquette*, to regulate our gathering enthusiasms in keeping with the needs of other organisms in the ecosystem (non-foraging humans included).

Paradoxically, it may be the restaurants that are doing most to develop this. The new wild food recipes use minute quantities of their ingredients. The ways in which they are cooked – frosted, blanched, quick-pickled, for instance – are designed to bring out the intensity of flavour, that 'bitter sweet' of the gathered wilding that Thoreau rhapsodised over. And chefs like René Redzepi are conjuring whole miniature ecosystems in their dishes. One of Noma's set-pieces is 'Blueberries surrounded by their natural environment', an extraordinary evocation of an autumn heathland, with balls of spruce and bilberry ice-creams nestling in a cooled salad of wood sorrel and heather tops. It might

be overstating things to call dishes like this works of art. But they have the same intentions as art, to encourage us to experience and think about the astonishing variety and texture of the wild, not to satisfy our hunger. And so they are able to employ the smallest quantities of their foraged ingredients.

I find I've drifted this way myself, evolving into a wayside nibbler. I like lucky finds, small wayside gourmet treats. I relish the shock of the new taste, that first bite of an unfamiliar fruit. Sun-dried English prunes, from a damson bush trimmed while it was in fruit. Single wild blackcurrants picked from a boat. Reed-stems, sucked for their sugary sap. Often the catch is apples, wayside wildings sprung from thrown-away cores and bird droppings. They seem to catch everything that's exhilarating about foraging: a sharpness of taste, and of spirit; an echo of the vast, and mostly lost, genetic diversity of cultivated fruits; a sense of place and season. I've found apples that tasted of pears, fizzed like sherbet, smelt of quince, and still dream of discovering the lost Reinette Grise de St. Ogne with its legendary fennel savour. But it's the *finding* of them, the intimacy with the trees and the places they grow, a heightened consciousness of what they need to survive, that are just as important. And it's maybe that growing sense of intimacy amongst the new foragers that will provide the feedback to conserve their resource: 'if you don't take care of it you lose it.' For me, it has generated the rough ethic, or etiquette, of scavenging. For preference I work the margins now, look for windfalls, vegetable road-kills, sudden flushes, leftovers. Or just those small, serendipitous treats off the bush. The 1930s fruit gourmet Edward Bunyan, meandering through his gooseberry patch, described the pleasures of 'ambulant consumption': 'The freedom of the bush should be given to all visitors'. The freedom of the bush: it's a liberty we should all enjoy, but also treasure.

This 40th anniversary edition includes many new recipes, including some based on ideas from René Redzepi, Sam and Sam Moro, and my old friend and fellow-forager Duncan Mackay. But I have not tinkered with the core of the text, despite its youthful and sometimes naïve idealism. That, after all, is what sparked the book off. If there are moments of, shall we say, tastelessness as a result, then the responsibility is entirely mine.

Richard Mabey, Norfolk 2012



## Introduction

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It is easy to forget, as one stands before the modern supermarket shelf, that every single one of the world's vegetable foods was once a wild plant. What we buy and eat today is still essentially nothing more special than the results of generations of plant-breeding experiments. For most of human history these were directed towards improving size and cropping ability. Some were concerned with flavour and texture – but these are fickle qualities, dependent for their popularity as much on fashion as on any inherent virtue. In later years there have been more ominous moves towards improving colour and shape, and most recently we have seen developments such as genetically modified crop plants and irradiated food, raising worries not only about human health but also about the potentially harmful effects of modern farming methods on the environment.

Indeed, concerns over modern methods of food production have led to something of a backlash, and Michelin-starred chefs are advocating the joys of marsh samphire, a native coastal plant that goes beautifully with another native wild food, fish. For the rest of us likewise: if plant breeding has been directed towards the introduction of bland, inoffensive flavours, and has sacrificed much for the sake of convenience, those old robust tastes, the curly roots and fiddle-some leaves, are still there for the enjoyment of those who care to seek them out.

To some extent, we have become conditioned by the shrink-wrapped, perfectly shaped produce we find in our supermarkets, and we are reluctant to venture into woods, pastures, cliff-tops and marshlands in search of food. But in fact almost every British garden vegetable (greenhouse species excepted) still has a wild ancestor flourishing here. Wild cabbages grow along the south coast, celery along the east. Wild parsnips flourish on waste ground everywhere. Historically these have always been sources of food in times of scarcity, yet each time with less ingenuity and confidence, less native knowledge about what they are and how they can be used. *Food for Free* is about these plants, and how they once were and can still be used as food. It is a practical book, I hope, though it would be foolish to pretend that there are any pressing economic reasons why we should have a large-scale revival of wild food use. You would need to be a most determined picker to keep yourself alive on wild vegetables, and since they are so easy to cultivate there would be very little point in trying. Nor are wild fruits and vegetables necessarily more healthy and nutritious than cultivated varieties – though some are, and most of them are likely to be comparatively free of herbicides and other agricultural poisons.

Why bother, then? Why not leave wild food utterly to the birds and slugs? My initial pleas are, I'm afraid, almost purely sensual and indulgent: interest,

experience, and even, on a small scale, adventure. The history of wild food use is interesting enough in its own right, and those who would never dream of grubbing about on a damp woodland floor for their supper may still find themselves impressed by our ancestors' resourcefulness. But those who are prepared to venture out will find more substantial rewards. It is the flavours and textures that will surprise the most, I think, and the realisation of to just what extent the cultivation and mass production of food have muted our taste experiences. There is a whole galaxy of powerful and surprising flavours preserved intact in the wild stock that are quite untapped in cultivated foods: tart and smoky berries, aromatic fungi, crisp and succulent shoreline plants. There is much along these lines that could be said in favour of wild foods. Some of them are delicacies, many of them are still abundant, and all of them are free. They require none of the attention demanded by garden plants, and possess the additional attraction of having to be found. I think I would rate this as perhaps the most attractive single feature of wild food use. The satisfactions of cultivation are slow and measured. They are not at all like the excitement of raking through a rich bed of cockles, of suddenly discovering a clump of sweet cicely, of tracking down a bog myrtle by its smell alone. There is something akin to hunting here: the search, the gradually acquired wisdom about seasons and habitats, the satisfaction of having proved you can provide for yourself. What you find may make no more than an intriguing addition to your normal diet, but it was you that found it. And in coastal areas, in a good autumn, it could be a whole three-course meal.

## Wild food and necessity

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It is not easy to tell how wide a range of plants was eaten before agriculture began. The seeds of any number of species have been found in Neolithic settlements, but these may have already been under a primitive system of cultivation. Plants gathered from the wild would inevitably drop their seed and begin to grow near their pickers' dwellings; and if, as was likely, the specimens collected were above average in size or yield, so might be their offspring. So a sort of automatic selection would have taken place, with crops of the more fruitful plants growing naturally near habitation.

By the Elizabethan era, the range of wild plants and herbs used and understood by the average cottager was wide and impressive. In many ways it had to be. There was no other source of readily available medicine, or of many fruits and vegetables. Yet even under conditions of necessity, how is one to explain the discovery that as cryptic a part as the styles of the saffron crocus was useful as a spice? The number of wild bits and pieces that must have been put to the





test in the kitchen at one time or another is hair-raising. We should be thankful the job has been done for us.

Many plants passed into use as food at this time as a by-product of their medicinal use. Blackcurrants, for instance, were certainly used for throat lotions before the recipients realised they were also quite pleasant to eat when you were well. Sheer economy also played a part, as in finding a use for hop tops that had to be thinned out in the spring. But like so much else, these old skills and customs were eroded by industrialisation and the drift to the towns. The process was especially thorough in the case of wild foods because cultivation brought genuine advances in quality and abundance. But if the knowledge of how to use them was fading, the plants themselves continued to thrive. Most of them prospered as they had always done in woods and hedgerows. Those that flourished best in the human habitats bided their time under fields which had been turned over to cultivation, or moved into the new wasteland habitats that were a by-product of urbanisation. Plants which had been introduced as pot-herbs clung on at the edges of gardens, as persistent as weeds as they were once abundant as vegetables.

Then some crisis would strike the conventional food supplies, and people would be thankful for this persistence. On the island fringes of Britain, where the ground is poor and the weather unpredictably hostile, the tough native plants were the only invariably successful crops. The knowledge of how to use these plants as emergency rations was kept right up to the time air transport provided a reliable lifeline to the mainland.

It was the two World Wars, and the disruptions of food supplies that accompanied them, which provided one of the most striking examples of the usefulness of wild foods. All over occupied Europe fungi were gathered from woods, and wild greens from bomb sites. In America, pilots were given instructions on how to live off the wild in case their planes were ditched over land. And in this country, the government encouraged the 'hedgerow harvest' (as they called one of their publications) as much as the growing of carrots.

Wild plants are invaluable during times of famine or crisis, precisely because they are wild. They are quickly available, tough, resilient, resistant to disease, adapted to the climate and soil conditions. If they were not, they would have simply failed to survive. They are always there, waiting for their moment, thriving under conditions that our pampered cultivated plants would find intolerable.

Some modern agriculturalists are beginning to look seriously at the special qualities of wild food plants. Conventional agriculture works by taking an end food product as given, and modifying plants and conditions of growth to produce it as efficiently as possible. In regions that are vastly different from the plant's natural environment, its survival is always precarious, and often at damaging

expense to the soil and the natural environment. The alternative approach is to study the plants that grow naturally and luxuriantly in the area, and see what possible food products can be obtained from them. This should become an especially fruitful line of research in developing countries with poor soils.

## Plant use and conservation

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These last few instances are examples of conditions in which wild food use was anything but a frivolous pastime. I sincerely hope that this book will never be needed as a manual for that sort of situation. But is there really nothing more to gathering wild foods than the fun of the hunt, and the promise of some exotic new flavours? I think there is. Getting to know these plants and the uses that have been made of them is to begin to understand a whole section of our social history. The plants are a museum in themselves, hangovers from times when palates were less fastidious, living records of famines and changing fashions and even whole peoples. To know their history is to understand how intricately food is bound up with the whole pattern of our social lives. It is easy to forget this by the supermarket shelf, where the food is instantly and effortlessly available, and soil and labour seem part of another existence. We take our food for granted as we do our air and water, and all three are threatened as a result.

Yet familiarity with the ways of just a few of the plants in this book gives an insight at first hand into the complex and delicate relationships which plants have with their environment: their dependence on birds to carry their seeds, on animals to crop the grass that shuts out their light, on wind and sunshine and the balance of chemicals in the soil, and ultimately on our own good grace as to whether they survive at all. It is on the products, wild or cultivated, of this intricate network of forces that our food resources depend.

I know there may be some people who will object to this book on the grounds that it may encourage further depletions of our dwindling wildlife. I believe that the exact opposite is true. One of the major problems in conservation today is not how to keep people insulated from nature but how to help them engage more closely with it, so that they can appreciate its value and vulnerability, and the way its needs can be reconciled with those of humans. One of the most complex and intimate relationships which most of us can have with the natural environment is to eat it. I hope I am not overstating my case when I say that to follow this relationship through personally, from the search to the cooking pot, is a more practical lesson than most in the economics of the natural world. Far from encouraging rural vandalism, it helps deepen respect for the interdependence of all living things. At the very least it will provide a strong motive for looking after particular species and maybe individual ecosystems.

And maybe foraging can contribute even more, in today's ecologically threatened world. If plants like wilding apples could contribute to the restoration of lost cultivated varieties, maybe, conversely, the restoration of cultivated land to wild, forageable land could build up new natural ecosystems. The possibility of the revival of a gentle communal use of such places would add foraging to the increasing range of community food initiatives, from organic food boxes to city farms.

## Omissions

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This book covers the majority of wild plant food products which can be obtained in the British Isles. But there are some categories which I have deliberately omitted.

- There is nothing on grasses and cereals. This is intended to be a practical book, and no one is going to spend their time hand-gathering enough wild seeds to make flour.
- I have touched briefly on the traditional herbal uses of many plants where this is relevant or interesting. But I have included no plants purely on the grounds of their presumed therapeutic value. This is a book about food, not medicine.
- This is also a book about wild plant foods, which is the simple reason (apart from personal qualms) why there is nothing about fish and wildfowl.
- But I have included shellfish because, from a picker's perspective, they are more like plants than animals. They stay more or less in one place, and are gathered, not caught.

## Layout of the book

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The text is divided into sections covering (1) edible plants (trees and herbaceous plants), (2) fungi, lichens and one fern, (3) seaweeds, (4) shellfish. Within each category, species are arranged in systematic order.

## Some picking rules

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I have given more detailed notes on gathering techniques in the introductions to the individual sections (particularly fungi, seaweeds and shellfish). But there are some general rules which apply to all wild food. Following these rules will help to guarantee the quality of what you are picking, and the health of the plant, fungus or shellfish population that is providing it.

Although we have tried to make both text and illustrations as helpful as possible in identifying the different plant products described in this book, they should not be regarded as a substitute for a comprehensive field guide. They will help you decide what to gather, but until you are experienced it is wise to double-check everything (particularly fungi) in a book devoted solely to identification. Conversely, never rely on illustrations alone as a guide to edibility. Some of the plants illustrated here need the special preparation described in the text before they are palatable.

But although it is obviously crucial to know what you are picking, don't become obsessed about the possible dangers of poisoning. This is a natural worry when you are trying wild foods for the first time, but happily a groundless one. As you will see from the text there are relatively few common poisonous plants and fungi in Britain compared with the total number of plant species.

To put the dangers of wild foods into perspective it is worth considering the trials attendant on eating the cultivated foods we stuff into our mouths without question. Forgetting for a moment the perennial problems of additives and insecticide residues, and the new worries about irradiated and genetically modified food, how many people know that, in excess, cabbage can cause goitre and onions induce anaemia? That as little as one whole nutmeg can bring on days of hallucinations? Almost any food substance can occasionally bring on an allergic reaction in a susceptible subject, and oysters and strawberries, as well as nuts of all types, have particularly infamous reputations in this respect. But all these effects are rare. The point is that they are part of the hazards of eating itself, rather than of a particular category of food.

**Here are some basic rules to ensure your safety when gathering and using wild foods:**

- Make sure you correctly identify the plant, fungus or seaweed you are gathering.
- Do not gather any sort of produce from areas that may have been sprayed with insecticide or weedkiller.
- Avoid, too, the verges of heavily used roads, where the plant may have been contaminated by car exhausts. There are plenty of environments that are likely



to be comparatively free of all types of contamination: commons, woods, the hedges along footpaths, etc. Even in a small garden you are likely to be able to find something like twenty of the species described in this book.

- Wherever possible use a flat open basket to gather your produce, to avoid squashing. If you are caught without a basket, and do not mind being folksy, pin together some dock or burdock leaves with thorns.
- When you have got the crop home, wash it well and sort out any old or decayed parts.
- To be doubly sure, it is as well to try fairly small portions of new foods the first time you eat them, just to ensure that you are not sensitive to them.

#### **Having considered your own survival, consider the plant's:**

- Never strip a plant of leaves, berries, or whatever part you are picking. Take small quantities from each specimen, so that its appearance and health are not affected. It helps to use a knife or scissors (except with fungi: see p. 322).
- Never take the flowers or seeds of annual plants; they rely on them for survival.
- Do not take more than you need for your own needs.
- Be careful not to damage other vegetation or surrounding habitat when gathering wild food.
- Adhere at all times to the Code of Conduct for the conservation and enjoyment of wild plants, published by the Botanical Society of the British Isles ([www.bsbi.org.uk/Code.htm](http://www.bsbi.org.uk/Code.htm)).

#### **What the law says**

The law concerning foraging is comparatively straightforward, at least on the surface.

- You are allowed to gather and take away the four Fs – foliage, flowers, fruit, fungi – of clearly WILD plants, e.g. blackberries and elderflowers, even on private land, though other laws regarding trespass and criminal damage may restrict you. You are not entitled to harvest anything from CULTIVATED crop-plants, e.g. orchard trees or field-peas.
- But under the Wildlife and Countryside Act and the Theft Act you may not SELL wild produce gathered in this way.
- Nor may you UPROOT any wild plant without the permission of the owner of the land on which it is growing.
- A few very RARE plants (none of those mentioned in this book) are protected by law from any kind of picking.
- On various areas of land otherwise open to the public – certain forests, commons, parks, and the new Open Access areas declared under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, 2000 (CROW) – there are BY-LAWS prohibiting any kind of picking. These are usually spelt out on notice boards.

But there are cases which don't fall into these clear extremes, about which the law is hazy. For example, nuts from a walnut tree overhanging a pavement are clearly the owner's whilst they are on the tree. But how about those that have fallen onto the public right of way? And how, on a road embankment, can a planted apple-tree be distinguished from a self-sown wilding? In all such matters, and others where the law is ambiguous, use your common sense, and don't be perpetually looking over your shoulder.

## Edible plants

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### Roots

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Roots are probably the least practical of all wild vegetables. Firstly, few species form thick, fleshy roots in the wild, and the coarse, wiry roots of – for instance – horse-radish and wild parsnip are really only suitable for flavouring. Second, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act it is illegal to dig up wild plants by the root, except on your own land, or with the permission of the landowner.

The few species that are subsequently recommended as roots are all very common and likely to crop up as garden weeds. Where palatable roots of a practical size and texture can be found, however, they are quite versatile, and may be used in the preparation of broths (herb-bennet), vegetable dishes (large-flowered evening-primrose), salads (oxeye daisy), or even drinks (chicory, dandelion).

### Green vegetables

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The main problem with wild leaf vegetables is their size. Not many wild plants have the big, floppy leaves for which cultivated greens have been bred, and as a result picking enough for a serving can be a long and irksome task. For this reason the optimum picking time for most leaf vegetables is probably their middle-age, when the flowers are out and the plant is easy to recognise, and the leaves have reached maximum size without beginning to wither.

Green vegetables can be roughly divided into three types: salads, cooked greens, and stems. For general recipes see dandelion (p. 291) for salads, sea beet (p.106) or fat-hen (p. 101) for greens, and alexanders (p. 225) for stems.

All green vegetables can also be made into soup (see sorrel, p. 122), blended into green sauces, or made into a pottage or 'mess of greens' by cooking a number of species together.

## Herbs

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A herb is generally defined as a leafy plant used not as a food in its own right but as a flavouring for other foods, and most herbs tend to be milder in the wild state than under domestication; being valued principally for their flavouring qualities, it is these which domestication has attempted to intensify, not delicacy, size, succulence or any of the other qualities that are sought after in staple vegetables. You will find, consequently, that with wild herbs you will need to double up the quantities you normally use of the cultivated variety.

The best time to pick a herb, especially for the purposes of drying, is just as it is coming into flower. This is the stage at which the plant's nutrients and aromatic oils are still mainly concentrated in the leaves, yet it will have a few blossoms to assist with the identification. Gather your herbs in dry weather and preferably early in the morning before they have been exposed to too much sun. Wet herbs will tend to develop mildew during drying, and specimens picked after long exposure to strong sunshine will inevitably have lost some of their natural oils by evaporation.

Cut whole stalks of the herb with a knife or scissors to avoid damaging the parent plant. If you are going to use the herbs fresh, strip the leaves and flowers off the stalks as soon as you get them home. If you are going to dry them, leave the stalks intact as you have picked them. To maintain their colour and flavour they must be dried as quickly as possible but without too intense a heat. They therefore need a combination of gentle warmth and good ventilation. A kitchen or well-ventilated airing cupboard is ideal. The stalks can be hung up in loose bunches, or spread thinly on a sheet of paper and placed on the rack above the stove. Ideally, they should also be covered by muslin, to keep out flies and insects and, in the case of hanging bundles, to catch any leaves that start to crumble and fall as they dry. All herbs can be used to flavour vinegar, olive oil or drinks, as with thyme in aquavit.

## Spices

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Spices are the aromatic seeds of flowering plants. There are also a few roots (most notably horse-radish) that are generally regarded as spices.

Most plants which have aromatic leaves also have aromatic seeds, and can be usefully employed as flavourings. But a warning: do not expect the flavour of the two parts to be identical. They are often subtly different in ways that make it inadvisable simply to substitute seeds for leaves.

Seeds should always be allowed to dry on the plant. After flowering, annuals start to concentrate their food supplies into the seeds so that they have enough to survive through germination. This also, of course, increases the flavour and



size of the seeds. When they are dry and ready to drop off the plant, their food content and flavour should be at a maximum.

## Flowers

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Gathering wild flowers for no other reason than their diverting flavours would at least be antisocial, and in the case of the rarest species it is illegal under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. Some of the flowers mentioned in this book are rare and should not be picked these days because of declining populations, though many of them have been anciently popular ingredients of salads, and are included for their historical interest.

The only species I advocate picking from are those where removing flowers in small quantities is unlikely to have much visual or biological effect. They are all common and hardy plants. They are all perennials and do not rely on seeding for continued survival. They are mostly bushes or shrubs in which each individual produces an abundant number of blossoms.

Most of the recipes in the book require no more than a handful or two of blossoms, but if you like the sound of any of them it may be best to grow the plants in your garden and pick the flowers there. Many species, such as cowslip and primrose, are commercially available as seed.

## Fruits

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A number of the fruits I have included are cultivated and used commercially as well as growing in the wild. Where this is the case I have not given much space to the more common kitchen uses, which can be found in any cookery book. I have concentrated instead on how to find and gather the wild varieties, and on the more unusual traditional recipes.

Almost all fruit, of course, can be used to make jellies and jams. Rather than repeat the relevant directions under each fruit, it is useful to go into some detail here. The notes below apply to all species.

Another process which can be applied to most of the harder-skinned fruits is drying. Choose slightly unripe fruit, wash well, and dry with a cloth. Then strew it out on a metal tray and place in a very low oven (50°C, 120°F). The fruit is dry when it yields no juice when squeezed between the fingers, but is not so far gone that it rattles. This usually takes between 4 and 6 hours.

Most of the fruits in this section can also be used to make wine (not covered in this book); fruit liqueurs (see, for example, sloe gin, p. 58); flavoured vinegars (see raspberry, p. 179); pies, fools (see gooseberry, p. 174); summer or autumn puddings (see raspberry, p. 179, and blackberry, p. 182).

Some fruits, notably the medlar and the fruit of the service-tree, need to be 'bletted' – in other words, half-rotten – before they are edible.

## Making a jelly

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Jellies and jams form because of a chemical reaction between a substance called pectin, present in the fruit, and sugar. The pectin (and the fruit's acids, which also play a part in the reaction) tend to be most concentrated when the fruit is under-ripe. But then of course the flavour is only partly developed. So the optimum time for picking fruit for jelly is when it is just ripe.

The amount of pectin available varies from fruit to fruit. Apples, gooseberries and currants, for instance, are rich in pectin and acid and set very readily. Blackberries and strawberries, on the other hand, have a low pectin content, and usually need to have some added from an outside source before they will form a jelly. Lemon juice or sour crab apples are commonly used for this.

The first stage in making a jelly is to pulp the fruit. Do this by packing the clean fruit into a saucepan or preserving pan and just covering with water. Bring to the boil and simmer until all the fruit is mushy. With the harder-skinned fruits (rosehips, haws, etc.) you may need to help the process along by pressing with a spoon, and be prepared to simmer for up to half an hour. This is the stage to supplement the pectin, if your fruit has poor setting properties. Add the juice of one lemon for every 900 g (2 lb) of fruit.

When you have your pulp, separate the juice from the roughage and fibres by straining through muslin. This can be done by lining a large bowl with a good-sized sheet of muslin, folded at least double, and filling the bowl with the fruit pulp. Then lift and tie the corners of the muslin, using the back of a chair or a low clothes line as the support, so that it hangs like a sock above the bowl. Alternatively, use a real stocking, or a purpose-made straining bag.

To obtain the maximum volume of juice, allow the pulp to strain overnight. It is not too serious to squeeze the muslin if you are in a hurry, but it will force some of the solid matter through and affect the clarity of the jelly. When you have all the juice you want, measure its volume, and transfer it to a clean saucepan, adding 500 g (1 lb) of sugar for every 500 ml (1 pint) of juice. Bring to the boil, stirring well, and boil rapidly, skimming off any scum that floats to the surface. A jelly will normally form when the mixture has reached a temperature of 105°C (221°F) on a jam thermometer. If you have no thermometer, or want a confirmatory test, transfer one drop of the mixture with a spoon onto a cold saucer. If setting is imminent, the drop will not run after a few seconds because of a skin – often visible – formed across it.

As soon as the setting temperature has been achieved, pour the mixture into some clear, warm jars (preferably standing on a metal surface to conduct away some of the heat). Cover the surface of the jelly with a wax disc, wax side down. Add a cellophane cover, moistening it on the outside first so that it dries taut. Hold the cover in place with a rubber band, label the jar clearly, and store in a cool place.

## Nuts

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The majority of plants covered by this book are in the 'fruit and veg' category. They make perfectly acceptable accompaniments or conclusions to a meal, but would leave you feeling a little peckish if you relied on nothing else. Nuts are an exception. They are the major source of second-class protein amongst wild plants. Walnuts, for instance, contain 18 per cent protein, 60 per cent fat, and can provide over 600 kilocalories per 100 grams of kernels.

It is therefore possible to substitute nuts for the more conventional protein constituents of a meal, as indeed vegetarians have been doing for centuries. But do not pick them to excess because of this. Wild nuts are crucial to the survival of many wild birds and animals, who have just as much right to them, and considerably more need.

Keep those you do pick very dry, for damp and mould can easily permeate nutshells and rot the kernel. As well as being edible in their natural state, nuts may be eaten pickled or puréed, mixed into salads, or as a main constituent of vegetable dishes.







Trees

## Scots Pine

*Pinus sylvestris*

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A conical evergreen when young and growing vigorously, up to 36 m (118 ft), becoming much more open, and flat-topped with a long bole, when older. Red- or grey-brown bark low down on the trunk, but markedly red or orange higher up in mature trees. Irregular branches, with needles in bunches of two, grey-green or blue-green, up to 7 cm (2 ½ inches) long. Native to Scotland, and originally much of Britain, as well as much of Europe and Asia.

A winemaker with patience and ingenuity might be able to devise a way of making a kind of retsina by steeping in a white wine base the resin that oozes from the bark of the Scots pine. But it is the needles that are the principal food interest of this tree, because of their strong and refreshing fragrance.

The Scots pine is our only truly indigenous pine, native in parts of Scotland and widely planted and naturalised elsewhere. The needles are quite distinctive, being much shorter than those of other species of pine, grey-green in colour and arranged in rather twisted pairs along the twigs. But the needles of any type of pine will do for cooking, provided they are gathered when fairly young, between April and August.

Anyone who has the patience to extract the tiny nuts from the pine cones will find this nail-breaking work rewarded by a pleasant wayside snack. (The pine nuts used in cookery come from the Mediterranean stone pine, *pinus pinea*.)

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### Pine needle tea

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Tea made from pine needles is a favourite American wild food beverage, though it has a decidedly medicinal taste. Take about 2 tablespoons of fresh needles, and steep in a cup of hot water for about 5 minutes. Strain and add honey and lemon juice to taste.

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### Pine needle oil

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A recipe for an aromatic oil which makes good use of pine needles' strong resinous scent simply involves soaking the needles in olive oil for a week or two; the resultant oil is superb for making into French dressings or for cooking meat in.







## Juniper

*Juniperus communis*

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Locally common on chalk downs, limestone hills, heaths and moors, chiefly in southeast England and the north. A shrub 1.5–3.5 m (4–12 ft) high – though there is also a prostrate form – with whorls of narrow evergreen leaves. Flowers, small, yellow, at the base of the leaves, appear in May and June. The fruit is a green berry-like cone, appearing in June but not ripening until September or October of its second year, when it turns blue-black.

At the time of ripening, juniper berries are rich in oil, which is the source of their use as a flavouring. They are of course best known as the flavouring in gin, and most of the historical uses have been in one kind of drink or another (though home-grown berries have not been used by British distillers for over a century). Experiment with drinks in which the berries have been steeped. Even gin is improved by, as it were, a double dose.

Uses across Europe are varied. The berries have been roasted and ground as a coffee substitute. In Sweden they are used to make a type of beer, and are often turned into jam. In France, *genévrette* is made by fermenting a mixture of juniper berries and barley.

Crushed juniper berries are becoming increasingly popular as a flavouring for white meat or game dishes. In Belgium they are used to make a sauce for pork chops. Seal the chops on both sides and place in a shallow casserole. Sprinkle with lemon juice and add parsley, four crushed juniper berries, rosemary, salt and pepper. Arrange peeled and sliced apples over the top and then pour over melted butter. Cook in a medium oven for 30 minutes.

## Barberry

*Berberis vulgaris*

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A shrub of hedge and waste places, growing to 3 m (10 ft). It is spiny, with small, toothed oval leaves, yellow flowers and scarlet berries from July.

Because of its spiny branches and brilliant scarlet berries, barberry was once popular as a hedging plant. It was stockproof as well as being ornamental. Then, last century, it was discovered that the foliage was a host of the black rust fungus that could devastate cereal crops, and most bushes growing near arable fields were destroyed. Today barberry is largely confined to hedges in pastureland and to old parks and commons. The berries are strikingly attractive, being brilliant red in colour, oblong in shape and hung in loose clusters all over the bushes. They are usually ready by late August or early September, but check their ripeness by seeing if a berry will burst when squeezed. It is advisable to use scissors and gloves when picking because of the shrub's long, sharp spines.

### Barberry dressing

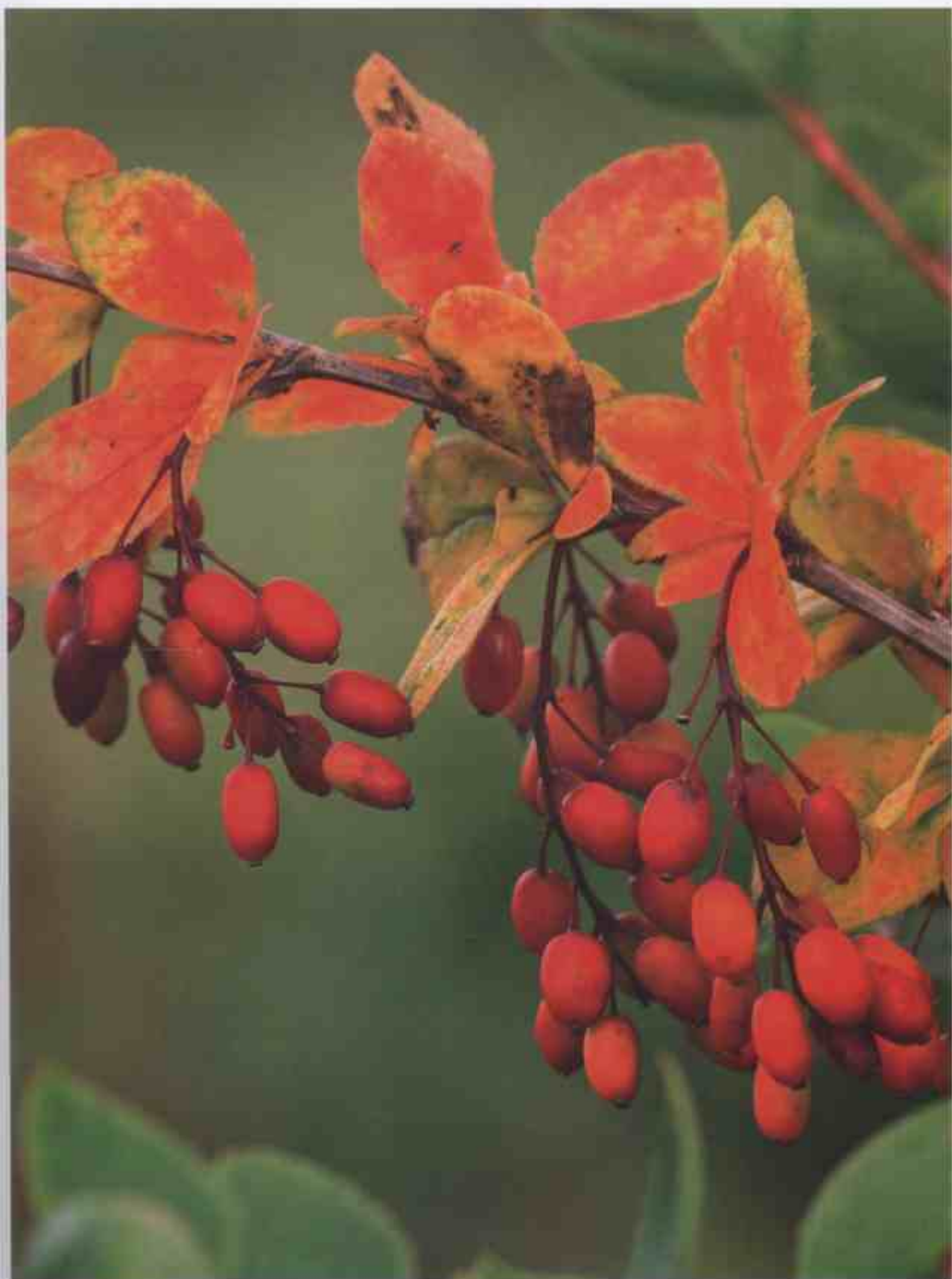
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The berries are juicy and pleasantly tart, and make an excellent jelly with lamb. But it is a shame not to make use of their shape and colour, and the sense they give of being concentrated capsules of juice. Many of the most interesting uses of barberry have been partly decorative. They can be used as a dressing for roast duck – they burst during the cooking and baste the meat with their juice. Mrs Beeton suggests that 'the berries arranged on bunches of nice curled parsley make an exceedingly pretty garnish for white meats'. Some cooks float the berries on top of fruit salads.

### Candied barberries

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The berries can be candied for longer storage. Boil sugar to the syrup point, then dip the bunches of barberry into the syrup for 5 hours. Remove the berries, boil the syrup to the candy point and return the berries for a few minutes. Then remove them, and allow to set.





# Hop

*Humulus lupulus*

A familiar perennial climber, 3–6 m (10–20 ft) high. Locally frequent in hedges, woodland edges and damp thickets, especially in the southern half of England. Flowers July to August.

The green, cone-like female flowers of the hop have been used in mainland Europe for flavouring beer since the ninth century. Although the plant is a British native, hops were not used for brewing in this country until the fifteenth century. Even then there was considerable opposition to their addition to the old ale recipes, and it was another hundred years before hop-growing became a commercial operation.

Wild hops can be used for home brewing, but a more intriguing and possibly older custom makes use of the very young shoots and leaves, picked not later than May. They may be an ancient wild vegetable, but most of the recipes came into being as a way of making frugal use of the mass of trimmings produced when the hop plantations were pruned in the spring.

The shoots can be chopped up and simmered in butter as a sauce, added to soups and omelettes, or, most popularly, cooked like asparagus. For the latter, strip the young shoots of the larger leaves, tie them in bundles and soak in salt water for an hour, drain and then plunge into boiling water for a few minutes until just tender. Serve with molten butter.

## Hop frittata

Frittata is an Italian recipe that can be used with many of the green-stem wild vegetables in this book – for example, asparagus, wild garlic, thistles and bramble shoots. A frittata should be much more solid than an omelette, and can be served hot or cold.

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| 2 handfuls of hop shoots | • Beat the eggs with seasoning to taste, and with the breadcrumbs and parmesan cheese. Chop the hop shoots into roughly 5 cm (2 inch) lengths and fry with the chopped onion in a little olive oil in a heavy pan until they have both begun to brown. |
| 1 small onion            |  |
| 4 eggs                   |  |
| 1 dsp dried breadcrumbs  | • Add the beaten egg mixture and simmer over a low heat. In about four or five minutes the frittata should have set.   |
| 1 dsp parmesan cheese    |  |
| Parsley                  | • Take a large plate, cover the pan and turn over so that the frittata settles onto it, slide it back into the pan, and simmer until the other side is brown.  |

# Walnut

*Juglans regia*

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**Deciduous tree, up to 30 m (100 ft) high, with grey, fissured bark. Leaves are odd-pinnate, with 5 to 9 leaflets. Catkins followed by flowers. Nuts ripen in September.**

The walnut is a native of southern Europe, introduced to this country some 500 years ago for its wood and its fruit. Although not quick to spread outside cultivation, there are some self-sown trees in warm spots in the south, and nuts can be carried away from the parent trees by birds and mammals.

Walnuts are best when they are fairly ripe and dry, in late October and November. Before this, the young 'wet' walnuts are rather tasteless. If you wish to pick them young, do so in July whilst they are still green and make pickle from them. They should be soft enough to pass a skewer through. Prick them lightly with a fork to allow the pickle to permeate the skin, and leave them to stand in strong brine for about a week, until they are quite black. Drain and wash them and let them dry for two or three days more. Pack them into jars and cover them with hot pickling vinegar. Seal the jars and allow to stand for at least a month before eating.

## Mushroom cutlets with walnut cream sauce

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Chop the mushrooms finely, cook in a little butter and drain. Soak 125 g (5 oz) of soft breadcrumbs in milk and squeeze dry. Dice and sauté an onion, beat together two eggs and chop some parsley. Combine all the ingredients, form into cutlets and fry in oil. Finally, chop the walnuts with a little more parsley, blend with cream and season.







# Beech

*Fagus sylvatica*

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Widespread and common throughout the British Isles, especially on chalky soils. A stately tree, up to 40 m (130 ft), with smooth grey bark and leaves of a bright, translucent green. Nuts in September and October, four inside a prickly brown husk. When ripe this opens into four lobes, thus liberating the brown, three-sided nuts.

Beech dominates the chalk soils of southern England and is associated with a number of species of fungi. It is a native species, and has long provided a source of fuel, although it did not gain popularity as a material for furniture until the eighteenth century. Since then it has become extremely popular in the kitchen – albeit for building kitchen units rather than for its culinary delights.

However, the botanical name *Fagus* originates from a Greek word meaning to eat, though in the case of the beech this is likely to have referred to pigs rather than to humans. This is not to say that beechmast – the usual term for the nuts – is disagreeable. Raw, or roasted and salted, it tastes not unlike young walnut. But the nuts are very small, and the collection and peeling of enough to make an acceptable meal is a tiresome business.

This is also an obstacle to the rather more interesting use of beechmast as a source of vegetable oil. Although I have never tried the extraction process myself, mainly because of a lack of suitable equipment, it has been widely used in mainland Europe, particularly in times of economic hardship, such as in Germany between the two World Wars. Although beech trees generally only fruit every three or four years, each tree produces a prodigious quantity of mast, and there is rarely any difficulty in finding enough. It should be gathered as early as possible, before the squirrels have taken it, and before it has had a chance to dry out. The three-faced nuts should be cleaned of any remaining husks, dirt or leaves and then ground, shells and all, in a small oil-mill. (For those with patience, a mincing machine or a strong blender should work as well.) The resulting pulp should be put inside a fine muslin bag and then in a press or under a heavy weight to extract the oil.

For those able to get this far, the results should be worthwhile. Every 500 g (1 lb) of nuts yields as much as 85 ml (3 fl oz) of oil. The oil itself is rich in fats and proteins, and provided it is stored in well-sealed containers it will keep fresh considerably longer than many other vegetable fats. Beechnut oil can be used for salads or for frying, like any other cooking oil. Its most exotic application is probably beechnut butter, which is still made in some rural districts in the USA, and for which there was a patent issued in this country during the

reign of George I. In April the young leaves of the beech tree are almost translucent. They shine in the sun from the light passing through them. To touch they are silky, and tear like delicately thin rubber. It is difficult not to want to chew a few as you walk through a beechwood in spring. And, fresh from the tree, they are indeed a fine salad vegetable, as sweet as a mild cabbage though much softer in texture.

### Beech-leaf noyau

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An unusual way of utilising beech leaves is to make a potent liqueur called beech-leaf noyau. This probably originated in the Chilterns, where large beechwoods were managed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to service the chair-making trade. Pack an earthenware or glass jar about nine-tenths full of young, clean leaves. Pour gin into the jar, pressing the leaves down all the time, until they are just covered. Leave to steep for about a fortnight. Then strain off the gin, which will by now have caught the brilliant green of the leaves. To every 500 ml (1 pint) of gin add about 300 g (12 oz) of sugar (more if you like your liqueurs very syrupy) dissolved in 250 ml (½ pint) of boiling water, and a dash of brandy. Mix the warm syrup with the gin and bottle as soon as cold. The result is a thickish, sweet spirit, mild and slightly oily to taste, like sake.



## Sweet Chestnut

*Castanea sativa*

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Well distributed throughout England, though scattered in Scotland. Common in woods and parks. A tall, straight tree, up to 30 m (100 ft), with single spear-shaped serrated leaves. Nuts in October and November, two or three carried in spherical green cases covered with long spines.

A nut to get your teeth into. And a harvest to get your hands into, if the year is good and the nuts thick enough on the ground to warrant a small sack rather than a basket. Although the tree was in all probability introduced to this country by the Romans, nothing seems more English than gathering and roasting chestnuts on fine autumn afternoons.

The best chestnut trees are the straight, old ones whose leaves turn brown early. Do not confuse them with horse chestnuts (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), whose inedible conkers look rather similar to sweet chestnuts inside their spiny husks. In fact the trees are not related, *Castanea sativa* being more closely related to the oak. They will be covered with the prickly fruit as early as September, and small specimens of the nuts to come will be blown down early in the next month. Ignore them, unless you can find some bright green ones which have just fallen. They are undeveloped and will shrivel within a day or two.

The ripe nuts begin to fall late in October, and can be helped on their way with a few judiciously thrown sticks. Opening the prickly husks can be a painful business, and for the early part of the crop it is as well to take a pair of gloves and some strong boots, the latter for splitting the husks underfoot, the former for extricating the fruits. The polished brown surface of the ripe nuts uncovered by the split husk is positively alluring. You will want to stamp on every husk you see, and rummage down through the leaves and spines to see if the reward is glinting there.

Don't shy away from eating the nuts raw. If the stringy pith is peeled away as well as the shell, most of their bitterness will go. But roasting transforms them. They take on the sweetness and bulk of some tropical fruit. As is the case with so much else in this book, the excitement lies as much in the rituals of preparation as in the food itself. Chestnut roasting is an institution, rich with associations of smell, and of welcomingly hot coals in cold streets. To do it efficiently at home, slit the skins, and put the nuts in the hot ash of an open fire or close to the red coals – save one, which is put in uncut. When this explodes, the others are ready. The explosion is fairly ferocious, scattering hot shrapnel over the room, so sit well back from the fire and make sure all the other nuts have been slit.





Chestnuts are highly versatile. They can be pickled, candied, or made into an amber with breadcrumbs and egg yolk. Boiled with Brussels sprouts they were Goethe's favourite dish. Chopped, stewed and baked with red cabbage, they make a rich vegetable pudding.

## Chestnut purée

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Chestnut purée is a convenient form in which to use the nuts. Shell and peel the chestnuts. This is easily done if you boil them for 5 minutes first. Boil the shelled nuts again in a thin stock for about 40 minutes. Strain off the liquid and then rub the nuts through a sieve, or mash them in a liquidiser. The resulting purée can be seasoned and used as a substitute for potatoes, or it can form the basis of stuffings, soups and sweets, such as chestnut fool.

## Chestnut and porcini soup

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*For 4 people*

250 g (½ lb) chestnuts

(tinned will do)

30 g (1 oz) dried porcini

(better than fresh for  
this soup)

1 large onion

4 rashers of bacon

100 g (3 ½ oz) butter

lemon juice

fino sherry

- Peel the chestnuts, if you are using fresh ones (see page 44), and boil for an hour in a large saucepan with just enough water to cover (40 minutes will do if you're using vacuum-packed nuts).
- Reconstitute the dried porcini in sufficient boiling water to cover them, and leave to soak for 30 minutes. Hang on to the water.
- Meanwhile peel and finely slice the onion, cut the bacon rashers into broad slices, and fry both in the butter for about 10 minutes, until the onion is golden. Then slip this mixture, plus the porcini and their soaking water into the pan containing the chestnuts and their water. Simmer for a further 15 minutes.
- Cool the soup a little, and liquidise in batches until it's thoroughly smooth, adding water if necessary until it is at your preferred consistency.
- Reheat in the pan with a squeeze of lemon juice, and just before serving add a small glass of fino sherry.



## Chestnut flan

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Chestnut flour is difficult to make at home, but is obtainable in most health food stores. This is a recipe from Corsica.

100 g (3 ½ oz)

chestnut flour

750 ml (1 ½ pints) milk

150 g (5 oz) sugar

butter

4 eggs

Put the chestnut flour, milk and sugar into a saucepan and heat gently, stirring frequently until the flour lumps have vanished. Continue to simmer, just short of boiling until the mixture becomes quite thick (about 10 minutes). Line a round oven dish, about 5 cm deep, with greaseproof paper, and rub a little butter over the paper. Beat the eggs in a bowl, and stir into the chestnut mixture. Pour into the dish and bake in an oven at 160°C/gas 3 for 40 minutes. Leave to cool overnight, or for at least a few hours, and turn upside down on to a large plate before serving.

PS: Chestnut flour can be substituted for wheat flour in almost any recipe, provided you add baking powder to help it rise a little. Try it, for instance, in a Yorkshire pudding, cooked under the meat.







## Oak

*Quercus robur*/*Quercus petraea*

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A common deciduous tree up to 35 m (115 ft) high, typically with a broad, domed crown. The two common species are pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*), which occurs throughout Britain, and sessile oak (*Q. petraea*), which is the dominant species in northern and western Britain, and in Ireland. Leaves are distinctively shaped, with irregular lobes. The fruits (acorns) ripen in September to October.

The oak tree has formed part of our folklore and history for centuries, not only as a source of timber for building houses and ships but also as a source of food. Like beechmast, however, the chief economic use of acorns has been as animal fodder, and they have been used as human food chiefly in times of famine. The raw kernels are forbiddingly bitter to most palates, but chopped and roasted they can be used as a substitute for almonds. In Europe the most common use of acorns has been to roast them as a substitute for coffee, and they were recommended for this role during the Second World War. Chop the kernels, roast to a light brown colour, grind up, then roast again.

# Hazel

*Corylus avellana*

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An abundant and widespread tree, found in woods, hedgerows and scrubland. A small tree or multi-stemmed shrub, 1.5–3.5 m (4–12 ft) high, with roundish, downy, toothed leaves. Well known for the yellow male catkins, called 'lambs' tails', which appear in the winter. Nuts from late August to October, 1–2.5 cm ( $\frac{1}{2}$ –1 inch) long, ovoid and encased in a thick green-lobed husk.

The hazel was among the first species to recolonise the British Isles after the last Ice Age. It is an extremely useful tree, with leaves that can be used as food for livestock, branches for building fences and shelters, and nuts that can be eaten as food. Widely eaten in prehistoric times, the hazelnut became part of Celtic legend – its compact shape, hard shell and nutritious fruit was an emblem of concentrated wisdom. Today they are grown commercially in many parts of the world, and are second only to the almond as a world nut crop. Hazelnuts begin to ripen in mid-September, at about the same time that the leaves begin to yellow. You may have to compete with the birds and squirrels, as the nuts do not just provide a treat for humans. Look for them at the edges of woods and in mature hedges. Search inside bushes for the nuts, as well as working round them, and scan them with the sun behind you if possible. Use a walking stick to bend down the branches, and gather the nuts into a basket that stays open whilst you are picking: a plastic bag with one handle looped over your picking wrist is a useful device.

If the ground cover under the bush is relatively clear of grass, then it is worthwhile giving the bush a shake. Some of the invisible ripe nuts should find their way onto the ground after this. In fact it is always worth searching the ground underneath a hazel. If there are nuts there which are dark or grey-brown in colour then the kernels will have turned to dust. But there is a chance that there will also be fresh windfalls that have not yet been picked at by birds.

Once you have gathered the nuts, keep them in a dry, warm place but in their shells, so that the kernels don't dry out as well. You can use the nuts chopped or grated in salads, or with apple, raisins and raw oatmeal (muesli). Ground up in a blender, mixed with milk and chilled, they make a passable imitation of the Spanish drink *horchata* (properly made from the roots of the nutsedge, *Cyperus esculentus*). But hazelnuts are such a rich food that it seems wasteful not to use them occasionally as a protein substitute. Weight for weight, they contain fifty per cent more protein, seven times more fat and five times more carbohydrate than hens' eggs. What better way of cashing in on such a meaty hoard than the unjustly infamous nut cutlet?





To make hazelnut bread, grind a cupful of young nuts, and mix with the same amount of self-raising flour, half a cup of sugar and a little salt. Beat an egg with milk, and add it to the mixture, beating then kneading it until you have a stiff dough. Mould to a loaf shape, and bake in a medium oven for 50 minutes. Hazel leaves were used in the fifteenth century to make 'noteye', a highly spiced pork stew. The leaves were ground and mixed with ginger, saffron, sugar, salt and vinegar, before being added to minced pork.

## Nut cutlet

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|--------------------------------|---|
| 50 g (2 oz) oil                | • Mix the oil and flour in a saucepan. Add the stock and simmer for ten minutes, stirring all the time. |
| 50 g (2 oz) flour              |   |
| 500 ml (1 pint) stock          | • Add the breadcrumbs and grated hazelnuts.   |
| 75 g (3 oz) breadcrumbs        | Season.   |
| 50 g (2 oz) grated hazelnuts   | • Cool the mixture and shape into cutlets.  |
| Milk or beaten egg for glazing | • Dip the cutlets into an egg and milk mixture, coat with breadcrumbs and fry in oil until brown.       |
| Salt and pepper                |   |





## Lime

*Tilia europaea*

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Common in parks, by roadsides and in ornamental woods and copses. The lime is a tall tree, up to 4.5 m (150 ft) when it is allowed to grow naturally, with a smooth, dark brown trunk usually interrupted by bosses and side shoots. Flowers in July, a drooping cluster of heavily scented yellow blossoms. Leaves are large and heart-shaped, smooth above, paler below with a few tufts of fine white hairs.

The common lime is a cultivated hybrid between the two species of native wild lime, small-leaved (*Tilia cordata*) and large-leaved (*T. platyphyllos*), and it is now much commoner than both. It is one of the most beneficent of trees: its branches are a favourite site for mistletoe; its inner bark, bast, was used for making twine; its pale, close-grained timber is ideal for carving; its fragrant flowers make one of the best honeys. Limes are remarkable for the fact that they can, in bloom, be tracked down by sound. In high summer their flowers are often so laden with bees that they can be heard 50 m (160 ft) away. The leaves make a useful salad vegetable. When young they are thick, cooling, and very glutinous. Before they begin to roughen, they make a sandwich filling, between thin slices of new bread, with unsalted butter and just a sprinkling of lemon juice. Cut off the stalks and wash well, but otherwise put them between the bread as they come off the tree. Some aficionados enjoy them when they are sticky with the honeydew produced by aphid invasions in the summer. In late June and July the yellow flowers of mature lime trees have a delicious honey-like fragrance, and make one of the very best teas of all wild flowers. It is popular in France, where it is sold under the name of *tilleul*.

## Tilleul

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Gather the flowers whilst they are in full bloom, in June or early July, and lay them out on trays or sheets of paper in a warm, well-ventilated room to dry. After two or three weeks they should have turned brittle and will be ready for use. Make tea from them in the usual way, experimenting with strengths, and serve like China tea, without milk.

## Sloe, Blackthorn

*Prunus spinosa*

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Widespread and abundant in woods and hedgerows throughout the British Isles, though thinning out in the north of Scotland. A stiff, dense shrub, up to 6 m (20 ft) high, with long thorns and oval leaves. The flowers are small and pure white and appear before the leaves. The fruit is a small, round, very dark blue berry covered when young with a paler bloom.

The sloe is one of the ancestors of cultivated plums. Crossed with the cherry plum (*Prunus cerasifera*), selected, crossed again, it eventually produced fruits as sweet and sumptuous as the Victoria plum. Yet the wild sloe is the tarest, most acid berry you will ever taste. Just one cautious bite into the green flesh will make the whole of the inside of your mouth creep. But a barrowload of sloe-stones was collected during the excavation of a Neolithic lake village at Glastonbury. Were they just used for dyeing? Or did our ancestors have hardier palates than us? For all its potent acidity, the sloe is very far from being a useless fruit. It makes a clear, sprightly jelly, and that most agreeable of liqueurs, sloe gin.

### Sloe gin

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The best time to pick sloes for this drink is immediately after the first frost, which makes the skins softer and more permeable. Sloe gin made at this time will, providentially, just be ready in time for Christmas. Pick about a pound of the marble-sized berries (you will probably need a glove as the spines are stiff and sharp). If they have not been through a frost, pierce the skin of each one with a skewer, to help the gin and the juices get together more easily. Mix the sloes with a quarter of their weight of sugar, and half fill the bottles with this mixture. Pour gin into the bottles until they are nearly full, and seal tightly. Store for at least two months, and shake occasionally to help dissolve and disperse the sugar. The result is a brilliant, deep pink liqueur, sour-sweet and refreshing to taste, and demonstrably potent. Don't forget to eat the berries from the bottle, which will have quite lost their bitter edge, and soaked up a fair amount of the gin themselves. And try dipping the drunken sloes in molten chocolate first. As an alternative, try replacing the gin in the recipe above with brandy or aquavit.







## Wild Cherry

*Prunus avium*

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Widespread and frequent in hedgerows and woods, especially beech. A lofty tree, up to 30 m (100 ft) high, with shining, reddish-brown bark and an abundance of five-petalled white flowers in the spring. Leaves are alternate, oval, sharply toothed. The fruit is like a small, dark or light red, cultivated cherry.

The wild cherry is a beautiful tree in the springtime, and again in autumn when the leaves turn red. The fruit can be either sweet or bitter. It used to be sold occasionally in London on the branch. These are the best fruits to use for cherry brandy. Put as many as you can find in a bottle with a couple of teaspoons of sugar, and top up with brandy. It will be ready after three or four months. Another wild cherry product is the sticky resin that exudes from the trunks, especially if they're damaged in some way. This has been used by children and forestry workers as a kind of chewing gum. It has, like most gums, more texture than taste.



## Bullace, Damsons and Wild Plums

*Prunus* species

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The true bullace, *Prunus domestica* ssp. *insititia*, may be a scarce native of old hedgerows, but the majority of wild plums found in the countryside are either seeded from garden trees or are reverted orchard specimens. Fruit blue-black, brownish, or green-yellow, and usually midway in size between a sloe and a cultivated damson.

Wild plums are ripe from early October, and, unlike sloes, are usually just about sweet enough to eat raw. Otherwise they can be used like sloes, in jellies, gin, and autumn puddings (see p. 58). Wild plums make excellent dark jams, and the French jam specialist Gisèle Tronche has pointed out how the addition of a little ground cumin seed and aniseed can improve conventional recipes. Alternatively try her late autumn, wild fruit *bumeur noir*, which she describes as having 'the colour of a good, healthy, black-tempered funk'.

## Wild fruit jam

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Crush together 800 g (2 lb) of stoned dark damsons and 200 g (8 oz) sugar, and leave overnight. Boil together 200 g (8 oz) of elderberries and 600 g (1½ lb) of blackberries for ten minutes. Add the damsons, another 600 g (1½ lb) of sugar, a tablespoon of cider vinegar and the juice of one lemon, and bring to the boil again. Cook for about an hour, until the desired consistency is reached. Pour into jars, leave to cool, and then seal.

## Lamb and plum tagine

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2 medium onions  
50 g (2 oz) butter  
1 tsp cumin seed  
1 tbsp finely chopped  
root ginger  
a few threads of saffron  
3 cloves of garlic  
1 tsp cinnamon  
1 kg (2 lbs) organic lamb,  
shanks or small leg  
500 g (1 lb) wild cherry  
plums, or damsons  
water, stock or white  
wine  
sloe or damson gin  
(optional)

In a casserole or thick saucepan, sauté the onions in the butter with the cumin seed, for about 10 minutes, until the seeds have burst and the onions are golden. Add the ginger, saffron, crushed garlic and cinnamon. Cook together for a couple of minutes. Fry the lamb in the mixture quickly, turning it so that all sides are slightly browned and well coated with the spices. Add half the damsons, and about a cupful of water, stock or white wine. Cook gently in an oven at 150°C/gas 2, for 2 hours, checking the level of the liquid once or twice. Fifteen minutes before the end, add the remainder of the damsons and a small glass of sloe or damson gin – if you enjoy the almond taste given by plum-family stones. The liquid should be appreciably thicker at the end (give it a sharp boil for 5 minutes on top of the stove if not), and the lamb coming free of the bone.



# Crab Apple

*Malus sylvestris*

A small deciduous tree, frequent in woods, heath and hedges. Leaves are oval and often downy. White or pink blossom appears April – May, and a yellowish-green fruit from July.

Most of the apples growing wild in the countryside are not true crab apples, but what are known as 'wildings' – that is, apples that have sprung naturally from the discarded cores of cultivated varieties. Apple varieties and species cross-fertilise very readily: this is why apple trees must be propagated by grafting if they are to stay true, and why it has been possible, over the last few centuries, for breeders to raise more than 6,000 named varieties. So don't despise wilding apples. They are often sweet enough to eat raw, and here and there, for instance, in a hedge by an old orchard, you may find a descendant of an obsolete variety such as Margil, which still has some of its parents' characteristics. True crab apples, which tend to be confined to old hedges and open woods, are best used for tart jellies and for pickling. They can be identified by their spiny branches, and by the smaller, harder and greener fruit. Use them not only by themselves, but mixed with other wild fruits for jellies or 'hedgerow jam'; blackberry, elderberry, wild plums and hazelnuts are good companions. Alternatively, pickle the apples, unpeeled, in spiced vinegar as an accompaniment to roast pork. Thrown in the pan with the meat, they will burst and baste it with their juices.

## Uncooked apple and pear chutney

This is a recipe developed by my brother David from an Australian version, which in turn seems to have originated in the East End of London, to judge from its rhyming-slang nickname 'Stairs Pickle'. It's unusual in being uncooked.

450 g (1 lb) sharp apples	Peel and core the apples and pears, and finely chop
450 g (1 lb) firm pears	the root ginger and garlic. Mix them thoroughly
25 g (1 oz) root ginger	with all the other ingredients, cover and leave in
2 cloves of garlic	a cool, dark place for 3 days. Bottle the chutney in
450 g (1 lb) raisins	sterilised jars. It will be ready to use in about a month.
450 g (1 lb) white sugar	
600 ml (1 pint) cider	
vinegar	
2 tsp of salt	
1 tsp chilli powder	





## Apple cheese

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Crab apples may be used to make an apple cheese, though wilding apples may produce an even better result. Wash, core and roughly chop about 900 g (2 lbs) of fruit, and simmer in 300 ml ( $\frac{1}{2}$  pint) of water. Once the fruit is soft, purée by pressing through a sieve. Add 450 g (1 lb) brown sugar to each pound of purée, and pinches of cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg and cloves, bring to the boil and simmer until very thick. Bottle in the usual way. When cool it should have the consistency of a soft cheese.

## Apple mash

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potatoes  
cooking apples  
butter  
seasoning

Use potatoes and apples in the proportions of two to one by weight. Peel and halve the potatoes and bring to the boil. After about 10 minutes add the peeled, cored and chopped apples. They'll both be cooked in another 10 minutes. Drain, return to the saucepan, add a few slivers of butter and some salt and pepper, and pound with a masher or fork. Do not add any extra milk, cream or oil, as there is plenty of liquid produced by the apples.

## Jugged celery and windfalls

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This is a wonderful old country recipe, gathered by Dorothy Hartley. It can be used as either a starter or a vegetable with pork or lamb.

*For 2 people*  
equal weight of windfall  
apples and celery,  
say 250 g ( $\frac{1}{2}$  lb) each  
2 cloves  
muscovado sugar  
4 rashers of bacon  
or ham

Wash and trim the apples, but leave their skins on. Chop roughly and stew them with a couple of cloves and a spoonful of muscovado sugar in as little water as possible, until they are a firm pulp. Put a couple of slices of bacon in the bottom of the tallest, narrowest cooking pot you possess, pile the apple purée on top, then pack in as many sticks of celery as you can. They must be in an upright position, as it is the apple juices running down the fibres of the celery that makes this dish. Spoon out any apple purée that overflows, trim the sticks level and cover their tops with 2 more bacon rashers, cut to fit. Then bake in an oven at about 180°C/gas 4 for half an hour. If you don't have a suitable tall cooking jug, an ordinary casserole dish will do.

## Rowan, Mountain-ash

*Sorbus aucuparia*

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Widespread and common in dry woods and rocky places, especially on acid soils in the north and west of the British Isles. A small tree, up to 20 m (65 ft), with fairly smooth grey bark, toothed pinnate leaves, and umbels of small white flowers. Fruit: large clusters of small orange or red berries, August to November.

The rowan is a favourite municipal tree, and is planted in great numbers along the edges of residential highways, but you should not have too much trouble finding wild specimens. Their clusters of brilliant orange fruits are unmistakable in almost every setting, against grey limestone in the uplands, or the deep evergreen of Scots pine on wintry heaths. Unless the birds have got there first, rowan berries can hang on the trees until January. They are best picked in October, when they have their full colour but have not yet become mushy.

You should cut the clusters whole from the trees, trim off any excess stalk, and then make a jelly in the usual way (see p. 25), with the addition of a little chopped apple to provide the pectin. The jelly is a deliciously dark orange, with a sharp, marmaladish flavour, and is perfect with game and lamb.





## Wild Service-tree

*Sorbus torminalis*

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A relative of the rowan and the whitebeam, largely confined to ancient woods and hedgerows on limestone soils in the west and stiff clays in the Midlands and south. Up to 25 m (80 ft). Leaves are alternate, deeply toothed, in pairs. Flowers are white branched clusters, May to June. Fruit is brown and speckled, 12–18 mm ( $\frac{1}{2}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$  inch).

The wild service-tree is one of the most local and retiring of our native trees, and knowledge of the fascinating history of its fruits has only recently been rediscovered.

The fruits, which appear in September, are round or pear-shaped and the size of small cherries. They are hard and bitter at first, but as autumn progresses they 'blet' – or go rotten – and become very sweet. The taste is unlike anything else which grows wild in this country, with hints of damson, prune, apricot, sultana and tamarind.

Remains of the berries have been found in prehistoric sites, and they must have been a boon before other sources of sugar were available. In areas where the tree was relatively widespread (e.g. the Weald of Kent) they continued to be a popular dessert fruit up to the beginning of the twentieth century. The fruits were gathered before they had bletted and strung up in clusters around a stick, which was hung up indoors, often by the hearth. They were picked off and eaten as they ripened, like sweets.

The tree is also known as the chequer tree, referring to the traditional pub name Chequers (the chequerboard was the symbol for an inn or tavern in Roman times). The berries were used quite extensively in brewing.

### Chequerberry beer

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I have the house recipe for 'chequerberry beer' from the Chequers Inn at Smarden, Kent. 'Pick off in bunches in October. Hang on a string like onions (look like swarm of bees). Hang till ripe. Cut off close to berries. Put them in stone or glass jars. Put sugar on – 1 lb to 5 lb of berries. Shake up well. Keep airtight until juice comes to the top. The longer kept the better. Can add brandy. Drink. Then eat berries!'





## Whitebeam

*Sorbus aria*

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Locally frequent in scrub and copses in the south of England, and popular as a suburban roadside tree. Also a very striking shrub, flashed with silver when the wind turns up the pale undersides of the leaves.

The bunched red berries are edible as soon as they begin to 'blet', like service berries. In the seventeenth century John Evelyn recommended them in a concoction with new wine and honey, though they are rather disappointing.



## Juneberry

*Amelanchier lamarckii*

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An American shrub naturalised in woodlands in a few areas of the south of England, notably on sandy soils in Sussex. Up to 10 m (33 ft) high. Leaves alternate, oblong. Drifts of white blossom in April and May. Fruit purplish-red/black, 10 mm ( $\frac{1}{2}$  inch) with withered sepals, in June.

The purplish-red berries rarely form in this country, but they are sweet to taste, and can be eaten uncooked or made into pies. In America they are sometimes canned for winter use.

# Medlar

*Mespilus germanica*

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**A small, twisted deciduous tree, with long, untoothed and downy leaves. Large solitary white flowers appear in May. Fruits resemble large brown haws.**

Medlar was, together with quince, mulberry and walnut, one of the quartet of trees that were usually planted singly in old herb gardens, often at the corners. They are now largely out of fashion in cultivation, and are probably not native in Britain. Yet the odd tree can still be found in old parkland and orchards; and, in the south of England, in hedgerows and woods near farms. These may be bird-sown, naturalised specimens; but fruit trees were occasionally planted out in these sites so as not to take up cultivated ground. Medlars are remarkable for their dark contorted trunks, their solitary white flowers which sit on the trees like camellias, and for the large brown fruits that start to fall from the tree in November. Although they were once recommended as a treatment for diarrhoea, they are wood-hard in this state and must be allowed to 'blet', or decay, before they are edible. Kept in a warm, dry place for a couple of weeks, the flesh browns, sweetens and softens to a consistency something like that of chestnut purée.

## Medlar comfit

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The bletted fruits make an intriguing confection served as they are. The slightly 'high', fruity flavour and granular texture make them ideal for serving with whisky. The flesh can easily be squeezed out of one end of the fruits if they are properly ripe. Alternatively, the tops can be cut off and the flesh scooped out with a spoon, then topped with cream and brown sugar to taste.

## Medlar purée

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Medlar purée makes a good filling for a flan or pie. Make a pulp by mixing three parts of medlar pulped through a sieve, one part double cream, a little sugar and the juice of two lemons, all whipped together until smooth.





## Hawthorn, May-tree

*Crataegus monogyna*

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Widespread and abundant on heaths, downs, hedges, scrubland, light woods and all open land. Small tree or large shrub, up to 6 m (20 ft) high. Leaves glossy green and deeply lobed on spiny branches. Flowers: May to June, abundant umbels of white (sometimes pink) strongly scented blossoms. Fruit: small round dark red berries, in bunches.

The young April leaves – traditionally called bread and cheese by children in England – have a pleasantly nutty taste. Eat them straight from the tree or use them in sandwiches, or in any of the recipes for wild spring greens. They also blend well with potatoes and almost any kind of nuts. A sauce for spring lamb can be made by chopping the leaves with other early wild greens, such as garlic mustard and sorrel, and dressing with vinegar and brown sugar, as with a mint sauce. The leaf buds can be picked much earlier in the year, though it takes an age to gather any quantity, and they tend to fall apart. Dorothy Hartley has a splendid recipe for a spring pudding which makes use of the buds, for those with the patience to collect large numbers of them.

Hawthorn berries (haws) are perhaps the most abundant berry of all in the autumn. Almost every hawthorn bush is festooned with small bunches of the round, dark-red berries, looking rather like spherical rosehips. When fully ripe they taste a little like avocado pear. They make a moderate jelly, but being a dry fruit need long simmering with a few crab apples to bring out all the juices and provide the necessary pectin. Otherwise the jelly will be sticky or rubbery. It is a good accompaniment to cream cheese.

### Hawthorn spring pudding (Dorothy Hartley)

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Make a light suet crust, well seasoned, and roll it out thinly and as long in shape as possible. Cover the surface with the young leaf-buds, and push them slightly into the suet. Take some rashers of bacon, cut into fine strips and lay them across the leaves. Moisten the edges of the dough and roll it up tightly, sealing the edges as you go. Tie in a cloth and steam for at least an hour. Cut it in thick slices like a Swiss roll, and serve with gravy.

# Elder

*Sambucus nigra*

Widespread and common in woods, hedgerows and waste places. A tall, fast-growing shrub, up to 10 m (33 ft), with a corky bark, white pith in the heart of the branches, and a scaly surface to the young twigs. Leaves usually in groups of five; large, dark green and slightly toothed. Flowers are umbels of numerous tiny creamy-white flowers, June to July. Fruits are clusters of small, reddish-black berries, August to October.

To see the mangy, decaying skeletons of elders in the winter you would not think the bush was any use to man or beast. Nor would the acrid stench of the young leaves in spring change your opinion. But by the end of June the whole shrub is covered with great sprays of sweet-smelling flowers, for which there are probably more uses than any other single species of blossom. Even in orthodox medicine they have an acknowledged role as an ingredient in skin ointments and eye-lotions.

Elderflowers can be munched straight off the branch on a hot summer's day, and taste as frothy as a glass of ice-cream soda. Something even closer to that drink can be made by putting a bunch of elderflowers in a jug with boiling water, straining the liquid off when cool, and sweetening. Cut the elderflower clusters whole, with about 5 cm (2 inches) of stem attached to them. Always check that they are free of insects, and discard any that are badly infested. The odd grub or two can be removed by hand. But never wash the flowers, as this will remove much of the fragrance. The young buds can be pickled or added to salads. The flowers themselves, separated from the stalks, make what is indisputably the best sparkling wine besides champagne. One of the most famous recipes for elderflowers is the preserve they make with gooseberries.

Elderberries are useful as additions to a number of cooked recipes, in which any unpleasant aftertaste completely disappears.

The berries are ripe when the clusters begin to turn upside down. Gather the clusters whole by cutting them from the stems, picking only those where the very juicy berries have not started to wrinkle or melt. Wash them well, and strip them from the stalks with a fork. They are good added whole to apple pies, or added as a make-weight to blackberry jelly. (Both berries are on the bush at the same time, so if you are making this they can be gathered straight into the same basket.)

My favourite elderberry recipe is for Pontack sauce, a relic from those days when every retired military gentleman carried his patent sauce as an indispensable part of his luggage. Finally, one elder enthusiast enjoys eating, so









to speak, the flowers and the berries at the same time, by making a sorbet from the fresh flowers, and serving it with another sorbet, made with the last year's autumn berries – a conceit impossible before the days of the deep freeze.

## Elderflower and gooseberry preserve

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To make the preserve, trim off as much of the rather bitter stalk as you can, and have ready four flower heads for each 500 g (1 lb) of gooseberries. Top, tail and wash the gooseberries, and put them into a pan with 500 ml (1 pint) of water for every 500 g of fruit. Simmer for half an hour, mashing the fruit to a pulp as you do. Add 500 g of sugar for each 500 g of fruit, stir rapidly until dissolved, and bring to the boil. Then add the elderflowers, tied in muslin, and boil rapidly until the setting point is reached. Remove the flowers and pot in the usual way. (See p. 25 for a few extra notes on jams and jellies generally.) The flavour is quite transformed from that of plain gooseberry jam, and reminiscent of Muscat grapes. It is good with ice-cream and other sweets.

## Elderflower cordial

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This cordial will keep for six months, or you can freeze it as ice cubes or in plastic bottles (leaving room for expansion).

- |                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| 1 lemon                 | • Put the sugar in a large bowl and pour on the boiling water. Stir to dissolve.      |
| 25 g (1 oz) citric acid | • Grate the lemon rind, and slice the fruit.  |
| 1 kg (2 lb) sugar       | • Add the grated lemon rind, lemon slices, citric acid and flower heads to the water. |
| 10 elderflower heads    | • Leave for 24 hours, stirring occasionally.  |
| 750 ml (1½ pints) water | • Sieve through muslin, pour into clean bottles and seal with screw-top caps.         |

## Elderflower fritters

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A perfect and delicately flavoured finish to a summer meal.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 4 tablespoons flour                                       | • Make up the batter with the flour, egg and water.                                      |
| 1 egg   | • Hold the flower head by the stalk and dip into the batter.                             |
| 1 ½ cupfuls water   | • Shake off any excess batter, then plunge into hot oil and deep-fry until golden-brown. |
| Elderflower heads<br>(retain short stalks<br>for dipping) | • Trim off the excess stalk and serve with sugar and mint and lemon.                     |
| Oil for frying  |  |
| Fresh mint  |  |
| Sugar for dusting   |  |

## Pontack sauce

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There are any number of variants of Pontack sauce, particularly from the traditional hunting country in the Midlands. This one from Leicestershire probably used claret instead of vinegar in the original (Pontack's was owned by Château Haut-Brion).

The sauce was reputedly meant to be kept for seven years before use. My patience ran out after seven days, but having made rather a large bottle, I can report a distinct improvement in richness after the first few years. It has a fine fruity taste, a little like a thick punch, and is especially good with liver.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 500 ml (1 pint) boiling<br>vinegar (or claret) | • Pour the vinegar (or claret) over the elderberries in a stone jar or casserole dish. Cover and allow to stand overnight in an oven at very low heat. |
| 500 ml (1 pint)<br>elderberries                | • Next day pour off the liquid, put it in a saucepan with the salt, mace, peppercorns, cloves, onion and ginger.                                       |
| 1 tsp salt                                     | • Boil for 10 minutes and then bottle securely with the spices.  |
| 1 blade mace                                   |  |
| 40 peppercorns                                 |  |
| 12 cloves                                      |  |
| 1 onion, finely chopped                        |  |
| ½ tsp ginger                                   |  |





## Oregon-grape

*Mahonia aquifolium*

A member of the barberry family, originally from North America and naturalised in open woodland and game coverts. An evergreen shrub, up to 150 cm (5 ft) high. Leaves holly-like, with sharp spines. Flowers yellow and fragrant. The dark, white-bloomed berries form in bunches like miniature grapes.

Oregon-grapes are planted to provide cover and food for pheasants. The berries can be eaten raw, though they are rather acid, and are best made into a jelly.





## Herbaceous Plants



## Common Poppy, Field Poppy

*Papaver rhoeas*

**Widespread and abundant in arable fields and by roadsides. Becomes scarcer in Wales, northwest England and northern Scotland. Flowers June to October, deep scarlet, floppy petals at the top of a thin, hairy stalk, 30–60 cm (1–2 ft) high. The seed-pods are hairless, and flat-topped like an inverted cone.**

Poppies and cornfields have long been associated in our consciousness, from the Roman goddess Ceres, who was depicted with a bunch of poppies in one hand, to Monet's atmospheric, sun-drenched landscapes. The plant probably arrived in Britain with the first Neolithic settlers, and it thrived in farmland. Aggressive use of herbicides virtually eliminated the poppy from our fields after the Second World War, and the plant became confined to roadsides and waste places. More recently, however, changes in farming practices and a revival of interest in the flower have heralded its return to our landscape.

It was once believed that smelling poppies gave you a headache, and that staring at them for too long made you go blind. Superstition about the supposed poisonousness of the flower still persist, notably the belief that the seed heads contain opium. In fact no parts of the common field poppy are narcotic, least of all the dry seeds. It is the Asian species *Papaver somniferum* from which opium is derived, by the cutting and tapping of the juice from the unripe seed heads. Yet the dry ripe seeds of the opium poppy are entirely edible, and are the poppy seeds of commerce, used extensively in baking. Common poppy seeds make an acceptable, though less flavoursome, substitute. The seed heads start to dry in September, and are ready for picking when they are grey-brown in colour, and have a number of small holes just below the edge of the flat top. These are vents through which the seeds normally escape, and the seed in ripe heads can be readily shaken out of the holes.

Pick a handful of these heads and put them straight into a paper bag. Remove the seeds by inverting the heads and shaking them into the bag. Any that cling on to their contents are not really ripe. Poppy seeds are slate grey in colour and have an elusive taste. They are extensively used in European and Middle Eastern cookery, particularly for sprinkling on bread, rolls, cakes and biscuits. But they also go well with honey as a dressing for fruit, and with noodles and macaroni.









# Stinging Nettle

*Urtica dioica*

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Widespread and abundant in almost every sort of environment, particularly waste and cultivated ground, wet woods, hedgebanks, river valleys. A coarse, upright plant, growing up to 120 cm (4 ft) high, covered with stinging hairs. Leaves toothed and heart-shaped. Flowers June to September, thin catkins of tiny, undistinguished green flowers.

The stinging nettle is one of the commonest of all edible wild plants, and one of the most useful. There is evidence that nettles were cultivated in eighteenth-century Scandinavia, the coarse fibres of the stalks being used for cloth as well as the leaves for food. Samuel Pepys enjoyed a nettle 'porridge' on 25 February 1661, though he gives no details of the dish. Sir Walter Scott has the old gardener in *Rob Roy* raising nettles under glass as 'early spring kail'. And in the Second World War hundreds of tons were gathered annually in Great Britain for the extraction of chlorophyll, and to make dyes for camouflage nets.

Nettles and people are plainly old companions. Wherever the soil has been enriched by human settlement – be it boneyards or back gardens – there will be nettles. Because they take up nutrients very slowly, nettles can be astonishingly persistent on such sites. In woods in the Salisbury area they are still flourishing on the buried refuse of Romano-British villages abandoned 1,600 years ago. The striking ability of nettles to make use of minerals and nitrogen in enriched soils gives them a high ranking in nutrition tables. They have high levels of vitamins A and C, 2.3 per cent by weight of iron, and a remarkable 5.5 per cent of protein.

Nettles should not be picked for eating after the beginning of June. In high summer the leaves become coarse in texture, unpleasantly bitter in taste and decidedly laxative. The best time for them is when the young shoots are no more than about 20 centimetres high. Pick these shoots whole or, if you are gathering later in the year, just the tops and the young pale green leaves. It is as well to use gloves whilst doing this, even if you do have a Spartan belief in the protection of the firm grasp.

Before cooking your nettles remove the tougher stems and wash well. They can be used in a number of ways. As a straight vegetable they should be boiled gently in a closed pan for about four minutes, in no more water than adheres to the leaves after washing. Strain off the water well, add a large knob of butter and plenty of seasoning (and perhaps some chopped onion), and simmer for a further five minutes, turning and mashing all the while. The resulting purée is interestingly fluffy in texture, but rather insipid – don't expect it to taste like

spinach, as is sometimes suggested. For my money nettles are better used as additions to other dishes, or as the basis for nettle soup, than as vegetables in their own right.

Nettle purée can be spread on toast and served with a poached egg on top, or mixed into balls with oatmeal and fried in bacon fat as a kind of rissole. The chef Anton Mosimann blends the purée with *fromage blanc*, new potatoes and nutmeg to make 'nettles nouvelle'. Another splendid recipe is for nettle haggis. The nettle purée is mixed with leeks and cabbage, freshly fried bacon and partially cooked oatmeal (or rice or barley), the whole boiled for an hour or so in a muslin bag, and served with gravy. More modern recipes include deep-frying the leaves to the consistency of green crisps. Young nettle leaves have also been made into beer and used as the basis for a herbal tea.

Note: to be caught eating nettles will cause more consternation amongst your friends than the munching of any number of other more dubious plants. Reassure them that the chemicals responsible for the sting are quite destroyed by cooking – and offer them a taste.

## Nettle soup

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- |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 4 large handfuls<br>of nettle tops    | • Strip the nettles from the thicker stalks, and wash.   |
| 1 large onion                         | • Melt the butter and simmer the chopped onion<br>in it until golden.  |
| 50 g (2 oz) butter                    | • Add the nettles (or an equivalent amount of nettle<br>purée) and the chopped potatoes, and cook for<br>2–3 minutes.                            |
| 2 potatoes                            | • Add the stock, and simmer for 20 minutes, using<br>a wooden spoon from time to time to crush the<br>potatoes.                                  |
| 1 litre (2 pints)<br>vegetable stock  | • Add the seasoning, plus a little grated nutmeg,<br>and serve with a swirl of <i>crème fraîche</i> .  |
| 1 tablespoon <i>crème<br/>fraîche</i> | • If you prefer a smoother soup, put the mixture<br>through a liquidiser before serving. Reheat,<br>and add seasoning and <i>crème fraîche</i> . |
| Seasoning, including<br>grated nutmeg |  |







## Bog-myrtle, Sweet Gale

*Myrica gale*

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Locally common in bogs, marshes and wet heaths, mainly in Scotland, Ireland, north Wales and the northwest of England. Flowers April to May. A deciduous shrub, 60–180 cm (2–6 ft) high with red and orange (female and male) catkins on separate plants. These flowers appear in April or May, before the leaves, which are grey-green, narrow, toothed, on shiny reddish twigs.

Before the extensive draining of fen and wetland that began in the sixteenth century, bog-myrtle, or sweet gale, must have been a much more widespread plant. Now it is only locally common in wet, acid heathland and moors, mainly in the north and west, though some small, local populations do occur in southern England. Where it does appear, its leaves and flowers can scent the whole area with their delightfully sweet, resinous smell.

Gale was traditionally used for the flavouring of beer, before hops were taken into service in this country. There is evidence that this drink was being brewed in Anglo-Saxon times, and the isolated patches of sweet gale which grow around old monasteries and other early settlements suggest that it was occasionally taken into cultivation, outside its natural habitats.

The brewing recipe is rather elaborate, so experiment with sweet gale as a herb, and use it to flavour existing drinks. Its warm aroma – with hints of balsam, cloves and pine resin – will give a retsina-like tang to wine, if sprigs of bog-myrtle are steeped in the wine (in re-sealed bottles) for a month. The leaves are also good as a stuffing for roast chicken.



## Hottentot-fig

*Carpobrotus edulis*

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Trailing branched perennial with fleshy leaves, introduced from South Africa. Yellow, pink or magenta flowers with yellow stamens. Fleshy fruit appears May to July. Found on cliffs, particularly in Devon and Cornwall.

This succulent from South Africa is naturalised in the warm climate of south-west England, where its matted, succulent foliage and silky flowers can breathe a hint of the tropics into the most stolid British cliff scene. Its fruits, the figs, are edible but rather tangy.



## Fat-hen

*Chenopodium album*

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Common in cultivated and waste ground throughout Britain. An undistinguished plant, 20–150 cm (8–60 inches) tall, with stiff upright stems and diamond-shaped greyish-green leaves. Flowers June to September, pale green, minute and bunched into spikes.

Fat-hen is one of those plants that thrive in the company of humans. Prepare a manure heap in your garden and fat-hen will in all likelihood begin to grow there within a few months. It is one of the very first plants to colonise ground that has been disturbed by roadworks or house-building, its stiff, mealy spikes often appearing in prodigious quantity. No wonder that its use as a food plant dates back to prehistoric times. Remains of the plant have been found in Neolithic settlements all over Europe. The seeds also formed part of the last, possibly ritual meal fed to Tollund Man (whose perfectly preserved corpse, stomach contents included, was recovered from a bog in Denmark in 1950).

In Anglo-Saxon times the plant was apparently of sufficient importance to have villages named after it. As melde it is thought to have given its name to Melbourn in Cambridgeshire and Milden in Suffolk. The introduction of spinach, a domesticated relative, largely put an end to the use of the plant, but its leaves continued to be eaten in Ireland and the Scottish islands for a long while, and in many parts of Europe during the famine conditions of the Second World War. We now know that early people were lucky in their choice of fat-hen as a staple vegetable, for it contains more iron and protein than either cabbage or spinach, and more vitamin B<sub>1</sub> and calcium than raw cabbage.

The whole plant can be eaten raw, but it is probably best prepared and cooked in the same way as spinach, as a green vegetable, or in soups. It is pleasantly tangy, like young kale or broccoli.

## East Anglian Melde chicken

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This is Duncan Mackay's festive, highly local, way with fat-hen. It makes a colourful chicken stew. Joint and chop up a whole free-range or local organic chicken and fry the pieces in a large casserole pot with a knob of butter and whole peeled shallots. Once the chicken skin is browned, add to the pan sliced Lincolnshire carrots, previously washed pearl barley, and chopped, cored, Norfolk biffins. These biffins from the east are a dark red, late-maturing apple that can be stored over winter when these very hard fruits become softer. Add some dry Suffolk cider to cover and bring the stew nearly to the boil. Place the casserole in a hot oven for 1 ½ hours or until the chicken starts to fall off the bones. Reduce heat and stir in 4 good handfuls of chopped fat hen. Cook for a further 5 minutes and serve in large bowls with hunks of hot crusty Essex spelt bread and cold dry local cider.





## Good-King-Henry

*Chenopodium bonus-henricus*

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Widespread but rather local by roadsides and in cultivated ground; less common in Wales, Scotland, Ireland and the southwest. A medium perennial, often reddish, up to 80 cm (2-3 ft). Leaves triangular or spear-shaped, almost untoothed. Flowers in spikes, May to August.

The curious name has nothing to do with Henry VIII or any other king. It is a corruption of 'Good Henry', an elfin figure from Saxon folklore whose name was applied to this plant to distinguish it from 'Bad Henry', the poisonous annual mercury (*Mercurialis annua*) or dog's mercury (see p. 208), with which it sometimes grows but which it in no way resembles.

Good-King-Henry is another food plant of great antiquity, the remains of which have been found in Neolithic encampments. It is a native of the Mediterranean, and its seeds may have been brought over as weeds by the first farmers over 5,000 years ago. In medieval and Elizabethan times it was occasionally taken into cultivation, and it has lately come back into popularity (and commerce) as a herb-garden species.

Good-King-Henry is a perennial, which means that leaves can be picked from it continuously, as from an everlasting spinach. The leaves can be cooked as a spinach, and the young shoots like asparagus, if they are picked in the spring when they are not more than 20 cm (8 inches) high. Strip off the larger leaves, bind the shoots in small bundles, then simmer in water for no more than five minutes and serve with melted butter.



## Sea-purslane

*Atriplex portulacoides*

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Common on salt marshes in the south and east of England. Flowers July to October. (Opposite, top left and opposite, top right.)

The oval, fleshy leaves of this maritime plant make a succulent addition to salads. They can also be stir-fried with fish or meat.

## Common Orache

*Atriplex patula*

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Widespread and abundant throughout the British Isles, on bare and waste ground. Flowers July to September. (Opposite, bottom left, and opposite, bottom right.)

Young leaves and shoots may be used as a substitute for spinach.

## Spear-leaved Orache

*Atriplex prostrata*

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Frequent throughout the British Isles, especially near the sea. Flowers July to September.

Another species of orache that can be used as a spinach-substitute.





## Sea Beet, Wild Spinach

*Beta vulgaris* ssp. *maritima*

**Common on banks and shingle by the sea, except in Scotland. Perennial, up to 90 cm (3 ft) high, with shiny, fleshy leaves. Flowers June to September, tiny green blossoms in long leafy spikes.**

One of the happy exceptions to the small-leaved tendency among wild vegetables. Some of the bottom leaves of the sea beet can grow as large and as heavy as those of any cultivated spinach, and creak like parchment when you touch them.

The wild plant is one of the ancestors of our cultivated beets, from mangelwurzels through to chards and spinach-beet. Cultivation began at least 2,000 years ago in the Middle East, and was mostly directed towards filling out the long tap root into the forms we now pickle, feed to cattle or convert to sugar. If you look closely at some of the wild specimens you will occasionally find a red-veined individual that is from the strain that was developed into the beetroot.

The leaves have been changed little by cultivation, except to lose some of their powerful tannin-and-iron flavour. You can pick them between April and October – big, fleshy ones from the base of the plant and thinner, spear-shaped ones near the head. Try and strip the larger leaves from their central spine as you pick them: it will save much time during preparation for cooking.

Always take special care in washing wild spinach leaves (especially if they have been picked near public footpaths, where their bushy clumps can be targets for perambulating dogs). Remove also the miscellaneous herbage you will inevitably have grubbed up whilst picking the leaves, and the more substantial stems.

Sea beet can be used in identical ways to garden spinach. The small leaves which grow on specimens very close to the sea are tender and succulent, often as much as a millimetre thick, and are ideal for salads. The larger ones should be steamed, or boiled briskly in a large saucepan with no more than a sprinkle of water at the bottom. Leave the lid on for a few minutes, and at intervals chop and press down the leaves. When the vegetable has changed colour to a very dark green, remove the lid altogether and simmer for a further two or three minutes to boil off some of the remaining water, then transfer to a colander and press out as much liquid as possible (saving it for stock or gravy). Return the greens to the saucepan, and toss over a low heat with a knob of butter. The taste is a good deal tangier than cultivated spinach, and good additions are diced tomatoes and grated nuts.

## Spinach tart

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This seventeenth-century tart is one of the most intriguing recipes I know for sea beet. Boil the leaves in the usual way, and chop them up with a few hard-boiled egg yolks. Set into a pastry tart case, and pour on a sauce made of melted sugar, raisins and a touch of cinnamon. Bake in a moderate oven for about half an hour.

## Marsh Samphire, Glasswort

*Salicornia* species

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**Common and often abundant on salt marshes round most British coasts. Succulent annuals, varying from single unbranched stems to thick stubby bushes up to 30 cm (1 ft) tall. The stems are plump, shiny and jointed. Flowers minute, and only really visible as one or two white to red stamens growing out of the junctions in the stems, August to September.**

I have always had a special affection for marsh samphire. It was the plant which first made me aware that there was rather more to edible wild plant use than picking blackberries and roasting chestnuts. But even in its own right samphire is a real character. It is surrounded by a wealth of folklore about when and where it should be picked. The plant is ready for picking, so they say, on the longest day (and so it usually is), and the healthiest specimens are those that have been 'washed by every tide'.

The plant has a liking for execrably muddy situations, and grows in such abundance on salt marshes that communal picking seems the natural way to cope with it: a combination of circumstances that hardly encourages a serious frame of mind. You go out at low tide, with buckets and wellingtons, through the sea-aster and wormwood in the rough ground at the edge of the saltings, on to the tidal reaches where the crop grows. This is a world crisscrossed by deep and hidden creeks, by which you will be tripped, cut off and plastered up to the thigh with glistening wet mud. In these creeks the samphire grows tall and bushy, like an amiable desert cactus. After the notorious 1953 floods in East Anglia, when all types of unconventional nutrients must have been washed into the marshes, a bush of samphire 6 inches tall and as thick as a leek at the base was discovered in one Norfolk creek. It was carried away on a bicycle crossbar and later hung up above the bar of a local pub.

On the poorer, sandier flats the plants are smaller, and they tend to grow as single shoots not more than 15 cm (6 inches) high. Yet they make up for this in sheer numbers. Often a bed can completely carpet several acres of marsh, and look as though it could be cut with a lawnmower. But there are no short cuts. Traditionally, samphire was gathered by pulling it up by the roots. This is now illegal, so there is no escaping half an hour in a stooping position, snipping the stems individually with a sharp knife or pair of scissors. But then hunched up and grubbing about in the mud is the only true way to appreciate the delights of samphire-gathering. Collect the stems into a bucket, basket or best of all a string bag, and rinse the bunch roughly in sea water to remove the worst of the mud. When you have got your samphire home, wash it well and remove the





pieces of seaweed that will inevitably be stuck to some of the plants. But never leave samphire to stand in water for more than a few minutes. Its succulence is due to salt water stored by the plant, and the salt will quickly be sucked out into the fresh water, causing the plants to become limp and prone to decay. If you wish to keep it for a day or two before eating, dry it well and store, unwrapped, in the fridge.

The young shoots, picked in June or July, make a crisp and tangy salad vegetable. Try chewing some sprigs straight from the marsh. They are very refreshing in spite of their salty taste. To cook them, boil or steam in a little water for 8–10 minutes, drain and serve with melted butter. Eat by holding the stems between the teeth, to draw the flesh off the tough central spine. Samphire prepared like this can be served either as an asparagus-like starter or as a vegetable with fish, poultry or lamb.

A traditional way with samphire is to pickle it. In recent years I have found pickled samphire being offered as a bartop nibble in north Norfolk pubs, and there are signs that the plant is becoming more popular. Samphire is also appearing increasingly on the menus of metropolitan restaurants, though sometimes only as a garnish, and often imported from the Continent.

## Pickled samphire

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This was once done by filling jars with the chopped shoots, covering with spiced vinegar, and placing them in a baker's oven as it cooled off over the weekend. I would imagine that the result of 48 hours' simmering would be on the sloppy side, to say the least. To maintain the crisp texture of the plant and at least some of its brilliant green colour it is best to do no more than put it under cold pickling vinegar.



## Pigweed, Common Amaranth

*Amaranthus retroflexus*

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**A curious casual of waste and cultivated ground, with dense spikes of dry, greenish flowers.**

The plant originated in America and was much used by the indigenous people. The leaves, boiled, made a mild green vegetable, and the black seeds were ground into flour.

## Chickweed

*Stellaria media*

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**Widespread and abundant throughout the British Isles in gardens and disturbed ground. A weak plant which tends to straggle and creep before it has reached any height. It has single lines of fine hairs up alternate sides of the stem. Leaves oval, bright green and soft. Flowers throughout the year, a tiny, white, star-like flower, with five deeply divided petals. (Opposite)**

Chickweed is generally regarded as a bane in gardens. Yet it is one of the most deliciously tender of all wild vegetables, with a taste reminiscent of cornsalad or a mild lettuce. The Elizabethan herbalist John Gerard prescribed it for 'little birdes in cadgees – when they loath their meate'. But even in his time it was cooked as a green vegetable, and later hawked around city streets by itinerant vegetable sellers. Chickweed is one of the earliest wild vegetables to come into leaf, and it is a good base for winter, or early spring, salads.

Next time you are weeding the garden, try saving the chickweed instead of composting it. Those without gardens should be able to find some by any field edge, even in the winter months. The leaves are too small to be picked individually, so strip bunches of the whole plant, or choose the younger, greener sprigs and cut with scissors. The stems are just as tender to eat as the leaves.

The texture and mild taste of chickweed is probably best appreciated in a salad. Try mixing the young shoots with hairy bitter-cress (for a hint of pepperness), winter-cress and cow parsley, and dress with a light, sharp dressing made from lemon juice and sunflower oil.





## Cooked chickweed

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Wash the sprigs well, and put into a saucepan without any additional water. Add a knob of butter or a spoonful of oil, some chopped spring onions and seasoning. Simmer briefly for no more than two minutes – any longer and both taste and texture will go and you will be left with something resembling strands of green string. Finish off with a dash of lemon juice or a sprinkling of grated nutmeg.

## A mess of greens

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By March large numbers of wild plants have their young leaves showing well. Use a reliable identification book, and make a mess of greens to your own formula. Good components are: the flowers and young leaves of white and red dead-nettle. The flowerbuds – like yellowish broccoli – of escaped oil-seed rape, which has become an aggressive invader of road verges, and the similar buds of alexanders. The first leaves of jack-by-the-hedge, for its slight garlic savour, and ramsons for an even stronger garlic note. Sorrel, for its lemony sourness. Comfrey (when it's no more than 10 cm high) for cucumbersome succulence. Bitter-cress or Lady's-smock for pepperiness, dandelion for bitterness; even very young dock, for body. Cook as with chickweed. For a wild spring salad, pick and mix the leaves so that no one flavour dominates. Keep the dressing sweet and simple, as there should be enough sharp and garlicky notes already. Hazelnut oil, if you can find it, is light and makes a good base. Otherwise use sunflower oil, with just a little salt and sugar, and a dash of soy sauce beaten in.



## Bladder Campion

*Silene vulgaris*

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Widespread and common by roadsides and in grassy places. Leaves bright green and soft.

The young shoots and leaves can be used like chickweed, and added to spring salads or cooked as greens.



## Bistort

*Persicaria bistorta*

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**Widespread and locally common in wet, hilly pastures throughout the British Isles, except the south. Leaves oblong or arrow-shaped on long stalks. Flowers June to August, pink spikes topping off a straight, hairless stem about 60 cm (2 ft) high.**

In the early spring of 1971 an advertisement in the personal columns of *The Times* invited entrants for the first World Dock Pudding Championship, to be held in the Calder Valley in West Yorkshire. In parts of northern England there was a tradition of making Easter puddings – ‘dock puddings’ – from bistort leaves and various combinations of oatmeal, egg and other green herbs. Like many local customs, the making of dock or ledger pudding had declined in the twentieth century, but the 1960s and 1970s saw a revival, and there were over fifty competitors from this one valley for the first world championship. The competition is still held annually in the town of Mytholmroyd, with competitors required to follow a basic recipe including bistort leaves, chopped nettles, onions and oatmeal, all fried in bacon fat.

Bistort is a plant of damp upland meadows, out of the range of nibbling sheep (though one Calder Valley man claimed that the best plants grew on his granddad’s grave on Sowerby Top). It usually appears as a basic ingredient of Easter pudding, though quite why bistort should have been singled out as the vital ingredient in the sheep-grazing country of the north Pennines is hard to say. It can certainly be locally plentiful in damp hill pastures, and the leaves can be quite fleshy by Easter – but just as important may be the fact that bistort leaves have a comparatively mild taste, unlike some of the other customary ingredients of spring puddings. Many of the plant’s local names refer to its function in this pudding, from Passion dock (from Passion-tide, the last two weeks of Lent, which was the proper time for eating this rather scant dish) to Easter giant, a contraction of Easter mangiant (from the French *manger*, to eat).







## Dock pudding

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There are different recipes for dock pudding in many villages in Cumbria. In Raughtonhead, for example, they mix cabbage or kale leaves, young Brussels sprouts shoots, and leeks with the bistort. In Carlisle, dandelion and Easter ledges, gathered from the churchyard, are chopped up with sticks of new rhubarb, bound with beaten egg and pearl barley and boiled in a cloth. In Beetham, south of Kendal, the bistort leaves are chopped up and added to a dumpling mixture, which is rolled, sliced and fried in bacon fat. The dish even has an 'estuary' version from the commons around Epping Forest in Essex, where the leaves are rolled and skewered, like a vegetable kebab, and then simmered in milk and butter.

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|---|---|
| 1 handful of bistort leaves   | • Chop the bistort, leeks and other greens roughly and blanch in boiling water for a few minutes.   |
| 1 tbs each of the leaves of nettles, cabbage (or young leaves and shoots from Brussels sprouts) and dandelion, sorrel or dock | • Mix with the pearl barley, seasoning and two of the eggs, hard-boiled and chopped, and the other egg, beaten. Bind the mixture with a little oatmeal. |
| 3 leeks   | • Either put the mixture in a pudding basin and boil for ten minutes, or form into balls, coat in oatmeal, and fry in oil or bacon fat.                 |
| 2 blackcurrant leaves   |   |
| 1 cup cooked pearl barley   |   |
| 3 eggs  |   |
| Oatmeal for binding and/or coating  |   |
| Salt and pepper to taste  |   |
| oil or bacon fat  |   |

## Redshank

*Persicaria maculosa*

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Widespread and common throughout the British Isles in damp, shady places, near ditches, etc. Flowers June to October. (Opposite)

Leaves are rather insipid, but they can be used in mixed greens, or in the dock pudding mix (see above).

# Common Sorrel

*Rumex acetosa*

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Widespread and common in grassland, meadows, heathland and roadsides, especially on acid soils, throughout the British Isles. An erect perennial, 10–120 cm (4–48 inches) high. Leaves arrow shaped and clasping the stem near the top of the plant. Flowers May to August, spikes of small red and green flowers on a smooth stem.

Sorrel is one of the very first green plants to appear in the spring. The leaves can often be picked as early as February, when other green stuffs are scarce. In parts of the north and the Midlands, sorrel was used as a substitute for apple in tarts and turnovers, during the fruit off-season between the last apples in March and the first gooseberries. Sorrel's sharpness can make it an interesting stand-in for fruit in other dishes.

Sorrel makes a good lemony addition to salads throughout the spring and summer, especially if you cut or tear the strips across the grain (what the French refer to as *chiffonade*). They are marvellously cool and sharp when raw, like young plum skins, but perhaps too acid for some palates.

In Gerard's time the leaves were boiled and eaten, or made into a green sauce for fish. For this they were pulped raw and mixed with sugar and vinegar. Dorothy Hartley describes a late seventeenth-century recipe for the sauce, in which bread, apple, sugar and vinegar are boiled together until soft, then mixed, still hot, with sorrel purée. The mixture is then strained, yielding a thick green juice with a strong pungent taste.

In France sorrel is used in an enormous variety of dishes. The chopped leaves are added to give a sharp flavour to heavy soups of potato, lentil and haricot bean. The cooked purée is added to omelettes, or, like the sauce, served as an accompaniment to veal or fish dishes.

## Sorrel soup

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To make a rich sorrel soup, chop 500 g (1 lb) of the leaves with a large onion and a sprig of rosemary. Mix well with one tablespoon of flour and simmer the mixture in 75 g (3 oz) of butter for about ten minutes, stirring well all the time. Add 2 litres (4 pints) of boiling water, two tablespoons of breadcrumbs and seasoning. Simmer for one hour. When ready, take off the boil and just before serving stir in a well-beaten mixture of two egg yolks and 150 ml (¼ pint) of yoghurt.





## Curled Dock

*Rumex crispus*

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**The most widespread of all our docks, growing as happily in seaside shingle as in suburban field edges. (Opposite)**

The crinkly leaves, which can grow up to 30 cm (1 ft) long, are bitter, but have been used as a vegetable in the United States. The leaves are gathered very young and cooked with bacon or ham and a little vinegar. The leaves of our commonest dock, the broad-leaved dock (*Rumex obtusifolius*), have been used in the same way, though they are even more bitter.

Parents can pick a leaf or two of dock and crumple them up to rub into the skin of a small child who has been stung by a nettle. The miraculous alleviation of the pain is probably entirely psychological; but the confidence trick is as valuable as the notions of tooth fairies and Father Christmas, and should be perpetuated stoutly.

## Monk's-rhubarb

*Rumex pseudoalpinus*

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**An uncommon species of dock, with large heart-shaped leaves.**

Monk's-rhubarb was introduced as a potherb in the Middle Ages, and in the parts of Scotland and the north of England, where it still grows, it is rarely found far from houses.

# Common Mallow

*Malva sylvestris*

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Widespread and abundant on banks, roadsides and waste places, especially near the sea. Rather less common in Scotland. The plant is coarse, bushy and often straggly, 20–100 cm (8–40 inches) high, and carries crinkly, ivy-shaped leaves which are slightly clammy to touch when young. Flowers from June to October, five-petalled, purplish blossoms up to 4 cm (2 inches) across.

Mallow blooms late into the autumn, and its flowers have a strange, artificial elegance that is unexpected in such an obviously hardy wayside weed. The mauve petals are arched like some porcelain decoration, and veined with deep purple streaks.

The leaves stay green and fresh almost all the year, but are best picked in the summer months, when they can be stretched like films of gelatine. Always wash the leaves well and discard any that have developed a brownish rust, or are embedded with tiny black insect eggs.

Mallow leaves can be cooked as a spinach, but they are extremely glutinous, and a more attractive way of using them is to make them into soup. In Arab countries, notably Egypt, the leaves of a similar species are the basis of the famous soup, *melokhia*.

Common mallow is also known for its small, round seeds, called 'cheeses'. Children in country districts still pick and eat these, though they're such a diminutive mouthful that their taste and texture are hardly noticeable. Some parents have found that modern children are more attracted by the leaves, deep-fried in hot oil until they resemble a wafer-thin green crisp.

## Mallow wafers

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The easiest and perhaps the most attractive way of using mallow leaves is to deep-fry them, as a kind of green wafer. To prepare the leaves, drop them, a few at a time, into a deep pan of hot vegetable oil, preferably sunflower. They first become flat, then curl up at the edges and become a deep and almost translucent green. Lift them out with a spoon carefully, as they are brittle, drain on absorbent paper, and use either as a vegetable, or as a garnish for grilled or fried dishes. This technique can also be used with other large-leaved wild greens.







## Melokhia

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A fairly authentic version of the Egyptian soup. The *melokhia* can be served on its own, or with boiled rice, or with pieces of cooked meat and vegetables.

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|-------------------------------------|--|
| 500 g (1 lb) young mallow leaves    | • Remove the stalks from the mallow leaves, wash well, and chop very small or purée in a blender.  |
| 1 litre (2 pints) chicken stock     | • Boil the leaves in the chicken stock for ten minutes.  |
| 2 cloves garlic                     | • In a separate pan, prepare a garlic sauce by frying the crushed garlic in a little oil until golden brown, adding the coriander, cayenne pepper and some salt, and mixing to a paste in the hot pan. |
| Oil for frying                      | • Add this paste to the soup, cover the saucepan tightly and simmer for 2–3 minutes, stirring occasionally to prevent the leaves falling to the bottom.  |
| 1 dsp ground coriander              |  |
| Pinch cayenne pepper, salt to taste |  |

## Marsh-mallow

*Althaea officinalis*

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A tall perennial, 1.5–2m (5–6 ft), which grows near salt water in southern and eastern England. Soft-branched clumps with velvety pink flowers between July and September.

The plant that gave the sweet its name. Today marsh-mallow is made from starch, gelatine and sugar. But it was once produced from the roots of *Althaea officinalis*, which contain not only their own starch, but also albumen, a crystallisable sugar, a fixed oil and a good deal of gelatinous matter. They were gathered by fishermen's wives in the dykes and salt marshes of the east coast.

# Sweet Violet

*Viola odorata*

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Fairly common in hedgebanks and shady places. Low, creeping and downy. Leaves rounded. Flowers blue-violet or white, sweet-smelling. March to May.

A native of woods and hedgebanks, much cultivated in gardens, and escaped and naturalised far beyond its native range. Its flowers are pleasantly fragrant (though the scent is ephemeral because of its slight anaesthetising effect on smell receptors in the nose).

In the past sweet violet flowers were used quite extensively in cooking for their fragrance and decorative qualities. In the fourteenth century they were beaten up with a ground rice pudding flavoured with ground almonds and cream – and they still make a fine flavouring for rice puddings. The flowers and leaves were both used as ingredients in the elaborate Elizabethan salads known as Grand Sallets or Salmagundies. Much later, after émigrés from the French Revolution had made veal popular in this country, they were used as one of the elaborate floral dressings for joints of that meat. They are best known, though, as crystallised or candied sweets.

## Crystallised sweet violets

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Pick the flowers, with the stem attached, and dip them first into beaten egg-white and then into a bowl of fine granulated or caster sugar. Use a small paintbrush to coat difficult cavities, as it is important to cover every part with sugar to preserve the flower properly. Let the flowers dry for a few days on grease-proof paper before storing them in an airtight container in the refrigerator.









## Garlic Mustard, Jack-by-the-hedge

*Alliaria petiolata*

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**Widespread and plentiful at the edges of woods and on hedgebanks. Height 30–90 cm (1–3 ft). Leaves a fresh, bright green, and slightly toothed. Small, brilliantly white flowers appear April to June. (Opposite)**

Welcome previews of the spring, the soft leaves of garlic mustard (also called hedge garlic or jack-by-the-hedge) can sometimes be seen as early as February if there has been a mild winter. It is a biennial, and if a warm autumn follows there is often a second crop of new shoots and seedlings in September and October.

For those who like garlic, but only in moderation, jack-by-the-hedge is ideal as a flavouring. When bruised or chopped the leaves give off just a suspicion of the smell of its unrelated namesake.

Jack-by-the-hedge is a pleasant plant, upright, balanced in colour and classically simple in construction, and only a few leaves should be picked from each specimen. They are useful finely chopped in salads, but best possibly as a sauce for lamb, especially valley lamb, which may well have fed on it in low-lying pastures. In the early spring, chop the leaves with hawthorn buds and a little mint, mix well with vinegar and sugar, and serve with the lamb as you would a mint sauce. There is also a tradition of using garlic mustard with fish. Gerard recommends this, the seventeenth-century herbalist William Giles reports that it was eaten 'as a sauce to salt fish', and in Wales it accompanied herrings.

## Winter-cress

*Barbarea vulgaris*

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**Widespread by the sides of roads and streams. Flowers May to July.**

It is occasionally sold in markets in the USA, where it is cooked as a green as well as being used as an ingredient of salads. Try picking the young flowers just before they open in May, and stir-frying them as broccoli.



## Water-cress

*Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum*

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Grows abundantly in and beside running water throughout the British Isles. A hairless perennial, creeping or floating, 10–50 cm (4–20 inches). Stem hollow; leaves a rich, silky green. Flowers from June to October in a bunch of small white blossoms.

Now reduced to a steak-house garnish, water-cress was once one of our most respected green vegetables. It was certainly under small-scale cultivation by the middle of the eighteenth century, and quickly became a commercial product as the fast-growing science of nutrition caught a glimpse of its anti-scorbutic properties (which result, as we know now, from an exceptionally high vitamin C content).

Most of the water-cress we eat today is grown commercially, but the cultivated plants are identical in every respect to those that grow wild, sometimes in great green hillocks, on the muddy edges of freshwater streams. The plants to pick are not the young ones, which are rather tasteless, but the older, sturdier specimens, whose darker leaves have a slight burnish to them. These are the tangy ones, which justify the plant's Latin name, *nasi-tortium*, meaning 'nose-twisting'.

Never pick water-cress from stagnant water, or from slow-moving streams that flow through pastureland. It can be a host to one stage in the life-cycle of the liver fluke (*Fasciola hepatica*) which can infest humans as well as sheep and cattle. The larvae are killed by boiling, but it is best to avoid picking specimens that are likely to be infested. Do this by choosing plants in fast-flowing, clean water well out from the riverbank – though this will involve good balance and a sturdy pair of wellingtons. Do not pull up the plants by the root. Cut off the tops of the shoots and wash them well, wherever they have been growing. Water-cress makes a good cooked vegetable, especially if spiked with orange and lemon juice and chopped hazelnuts. Simmered with mashed pickled walnuts, it makes a tart sauce for fish.

### Water-cress soup

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Boil two bunches of water-cress, roughly chopped, in stock made from two large potatoes, 500 ml (1 pint) of water and seasoning. Cook for ten minutes, put through a liquidiser, add a little cream if desired, and serve chilled.





## Horse-radish

*Armoracia rusticana*

An Asian plant now widely naturalised through much of Europe. Common on waste ground in England and Wales; rare in Scotland and Ireland. Leaves large, slightly toothed, and dock-like, growing straight up from the root stem to a height of about 90 cm (3 ft). Flowers from May to September, a shock of white blossoms on a long spike.

There can scarcely be any other plant of such wide commercial use that is so neglected in the wild. Small jars of horse-radish sauce sell for fancy prices in up-market delicatessens, yet the plant grows untouched and in abundance on waste ground throughout England.

Horse-radish was brought to Britain from the Middle East in the sixteenth century, specifically as a spice plant. The prefix horse means coarse, as in horse-mint. The rougher the ground, the more horse-radish seems to relish it. It will grow in derelict gardens, on rubbish tips, even amidst abandoned brick piles,

regenerating chiefly from pieces of broken root and often quickly developing into large colonies. So you should have no trouble in finding a patch where you can obtain permission to dig up the roots. Remember that the law requires you to obtain the landowner's permission before digging up any wild plant by the root.

There can be no mistaking its crinkly, palm-like leaves, but if you are in any doubt, crush them between your fingers: they should have the characteristic horse-radish smell. A spade – desirable when gathering all roots – is imperative with horse-radish. The plant is a perennial, and carries an extensive and complex root system. You may need to dig quite deep and chop the woody structure to obtain a section for use. The exception is horse-radish growing on light sandy soils, which grows very straight and can often be extracted by a simple pull.

The worst part of preparing horse-radish is the peeling. Most sections are intractably knobbly, and need considerable geometric skill before they can be reduced to a manageable shape. Once they have been, the remains of the brown outer layer should be pared off with a sharp knife. This may be best done under water, as the sharp odour will have started to appear by now. You will be left with some pure white chunks of horse-radish which need to be grated before they can be used. This is best done out of doors, as the fumes put the most blinding onions to shame.

The freshly grated root can be used as it stands, as a garnish for roast beef or smoked fish. But use it fairly quickly, as it loses its potency in a couple of days. Or you can blend it with other ingredients (but under no circumstances vinegar) to make a horse-radish sauce.

### Horse-radish sauce (1)

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To make an instant sauce, whip up the grated horseradish with some plain yoghurt or crème fraîche, a little mustard, sugar and seasoning.

### Horse-radish sauce (2)

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A more substantial and longer-lasting sauce is made by mixing a teaspoon of dry mustard with a tablespoon of cold water, and blending until smooth. Combine with 6 heaped tablespoons of grated horseradish and salt and pepper. Allow to stand for 15 minutes, then blend into a cupful of white sauce.

## Hairy Bitter-cress

*Cardamine hirsuta*

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Common and widespread in gardens and waste ground throughout Europe, on paths and walls, also rocks and sand dunes. An annual, 5–25 cm (2–10 inches) high. Leaves compound, cress-like. Flowers white, small, in branched clusters, February to September. (Opposite, top left and opposite, top right.)

Hairy bitter-cress is one of the earliest edible weeds, with leaves that can be picked most months of the year. The whole plant can be eaten, and it has a pleasantly mild peppery flavour, sweeter than water-cress. It can be used in salads and sandwiches as a substitute for cress, and has an affinity with cream cheese.

## Cuckooflower, Lady's-smock

*Cardamine pratensis*

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Common in damp meadows, woods and by the edges of streams. A medium hairless perennial. Flowers April to June. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)

The leaves are slightly more spicy than those of hairy bitter-cress, and can be used in the same way. The name 'cuckooflower' is shared at a local level with a number of other spring flowers, indicating that their flowering heralds the first cuckoo of the year. The cuckooflower has a traditional use as an ingredient of Easter pudding (see p. 121).



## Common Scurvygrass

*Cochlearia officinalis*

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A rather nondescript little plant of coastal cliffs, rocks and salt marshes, also walls and banks. About 10–50 cm (4–20 inches) high, with dark green heart-shaped leaves and small white flowers in loose, domed clusters.

Once famous as the major source of vitamin C on long sea voyages, scurvygrass was taken on board in the form of dried bundles or distilled extracts. But it is an unpleasantly bitter plant, and the taste was often disguised with spices.

But sailors were not the only ones with reason to fear scurvy, and fads for early-morning scurvygrass drinks and scurvygrass sandwiches abounded right up to the middle of the nineteenth century. It was only the ready availability of citrus fruits which finally made the plant obsolete.

Scurvygrass still grows abundantly round cliffs and banks near the sea, and it was probably its convenient proximity that made it the favourite maritime anti-scorbutic.





## Shepherd's-purse

*Capsella bursa-pastoris*

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Abundant and widespread in waste and cultivated places. A downy, branched annual, 5–60 cm (2–24 inches). Leaves spear-shaped and deeply lobed, in a neat basal rosette. Flowers small with white petals and pink calyx. Fruit is small, heart-shaped pods.

Shepherd's-purse is one of the first wild plants to flower, and will sometimes flower all through mild winters. It is slightly peppery in taste, and is popular in China, where it is stir-fried, like cabbage and Chinese leaf.





## Field Penny-cress

*Thlaspi arvense*

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**Quite common in arable and waste places. Flowers May to November.**

As is the case with all the wild members of the cabbage family, field penny-cress can be used in the same way as chickweed, either in salads or as cooked greens.

## Dittander

*Lepidium latifolium*

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A robust perennial of salt marshes, sand dunes and other places near salt water. Up to 1 m (3 ft) high. Lower leaves long, up to 30 cm (1 ft). Flowers in a white cluster, July to September.

Dittander has a hot, pungent root, and was gathered from the wild and occasionally grown in gardens as a condiment before horse-radish and pepper became popular. It is a perennial and has an obstinate and aggressive root system like horse-radish, and is uncommon in the wild. Only beside a few estuaries on the south and east coasts can the tall, elegant leaves and robust flower spires still be found.

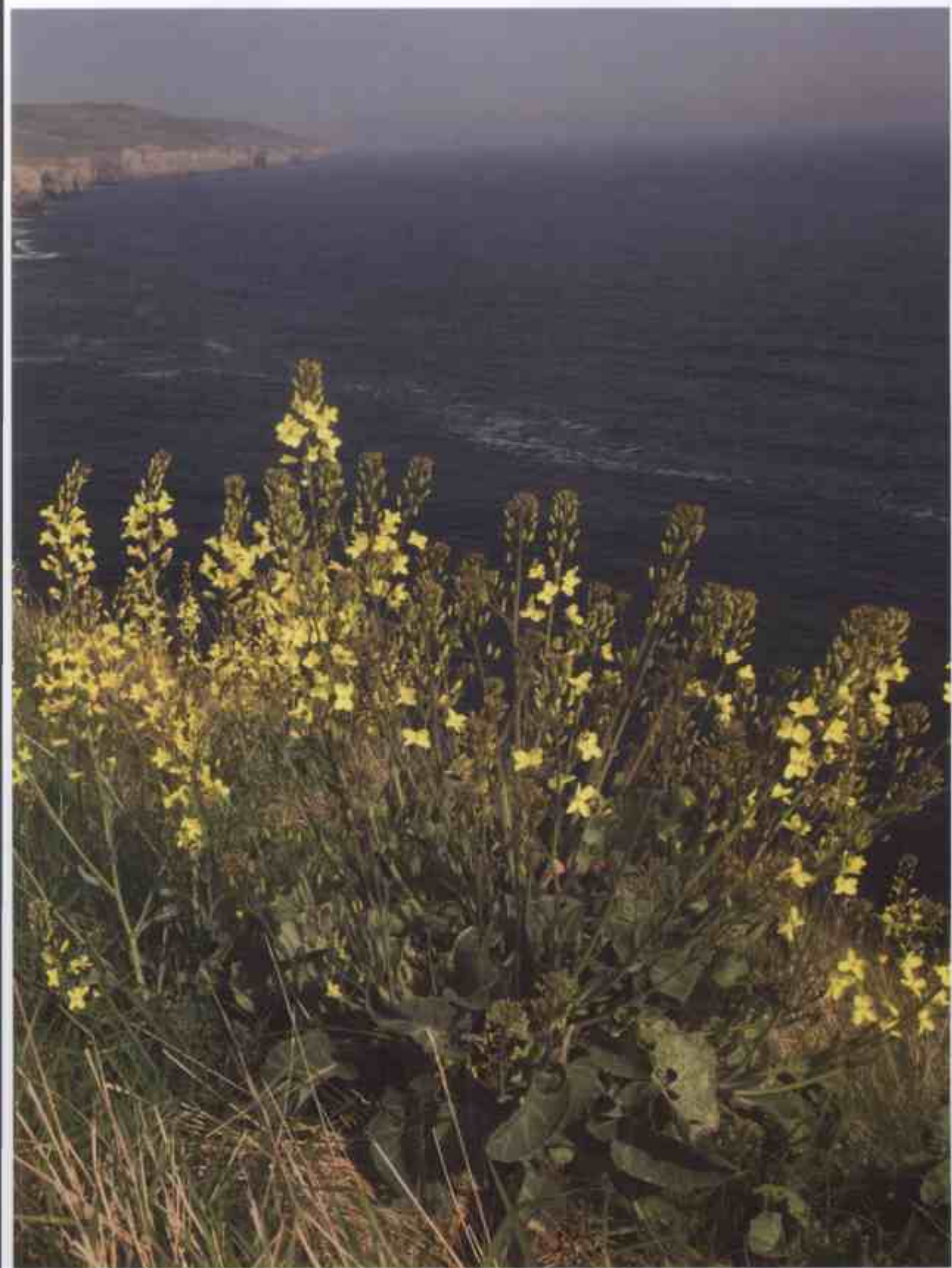
## Wild Cabbage

*Brassica oleracea*

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A hairless perennial of sea cliffs and rocks, on dry stony soils, up to 1.5 m (5 ft) high. Leaves greyish, lower ones large and lobed, upper ones unlobed and partly clasping the stem. Flowers yellow, in long clusters, May to September. (Opposite)

This scarce plant of the sea cliffs in parts of Wales and southern England is a variety of the same species as our cultivated cabbages, but it is uncertain whether it is the ancestor of those cultivated varieties, or whether the wild species originated from cultivated forms in ancient settlements. Today the plant is rare in its natural habitat. Yet escaped garden *Brassicac*s sometimes revert to this form if they are allowed to go to seed. You can tell them easily from the mustards and other related plants by their thick, greyish, fleshy leaves. They are bitter raw, but after long simmering are acceptable to eat.





## Black Mustard

*Brassica nigra*

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Quite common as an escape from cultivation on waysides and waste places. Tall, greyish-green annual, up to 1 m (3 ft) high. Leaves stalked, lower ones lobed and bristly. Flowers yellow, June to August. Fruit in the form of seed-pods pressed against the stem.

Use the young leaves of black mustard as a tangy addition to spring salads and cooked greens. The seeds begin to ripen in August to September, and have long been used in cooking. Collecting them can be a painstaking business, and you are unlikely to gather more than a pinch, but try pressing some into the cheese on the top of a Welsh rarebit before cooking. Slightly more seeds will be enough to make a chutney.

### Lemon and mustard-seed chutney

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4 onions

5 lemons

Salt

25 g (1 oz) black  
mustard seed

1 tsp allspice

500 g (1 lb) sugar

100 g (4 oz) raisins

500 ml (1 pint) cider vinegar

• Thinly slice the onions and lemons, sprinkle with salt and leave for 12 hours.

• Add the mustard seeds, allspice, sugar, raisins and vinegar.

• Bring to the boil and simmer for 1 hour.

• Transfer to jars and seal when cool.

## White Mustard

*Sinapis alba*

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A common weed in arable land, and an escape from cultivation, especially on chalky soils. Flowers May to October. This is the mustard of 'mustard and cress'. (Opposite)

Under cultivation the plants are picked when they are only a few centimetres high. In the wild they need to be picked rather later for certain identification, by which time they tend to be slightly bitter. Use as chickweed in spring salads or in cooked greens.

## Sea-kale

*Crambe maritima*

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Widespread but extremely local on sand and shingle near the sea. A cabbage-like plant, growing in large clumps with huge fleshy grey-green leaves. The flowers are white and four-petalled, and grow in a broad cluster, June to August.

I found my first sea-kale through a pair of binoculars, on a barren stretch of North Norfolk shingle over fifty miles from the nearest record in the *Atlas of the British Flora*. It was the only plant in sight and was hunched over the sand like some heavy, stranded crustacean. Some of the leaves were nearly two feet long, and had the texture of rubber sheets. They looked amazingly appetising, and I cut off a few for supper. They were so heavy and unwieldy that I had to improvise a driftwood and twine sling to get them the six miles home.

That evening we boiled the leaves for nearly an hour and a half. They seemed quite immutable, changing colour a little, but holding that massive texture to the end. Eventually we ate them as they were. It was the most powerful and tangy taste I have ever experienced, like chewing the remains of a sunken battleship.

Later, I learned that it was not the leaves that were normally eaten, but the young, white stems. Up to the nineteenth century sea-kale was a relatively common plant around the coasts, and there is little doubt that the use of the plant dates back centuries before it was taken into cultivation. In many areas on the south coast villagers would watch for the shoots to appear, pile sand and shingle round them to blanch out the bitterness and cut them in the summer to take to the markets in the nearest big town. But in 1799 the botanist William Curtis wrote a pamphlet called *Directions for the culture of the Crambe Maritima or Sea kale, for the use of the Table*. As a result the vegetable was taken up by Covent Garden, and demand for the naturally growing shoots increased greatly. This intensive collection was to have the effect of substantially reducing the population of wild sea-kale.

Now the vegetable is out of fashion, but the wild plant shows no sign of regaining its former status. So be sparing if you do pick it, and do not take more than two or three stems from each plant. Use young shoots or the lower parts of the leaf stalks, particularly any that you can find which have been growing under the ground. They sometimes push their way through up to a metre (3 ft) of shingle, and when harvesting you will need a sharp knife to cut through the thick stems. To cook the sea-kale, cut the stems into manageable lengths and boil in salted water until tender (about 20 minutes). Then serve and eat with melted butter, like asparagus. Alternatively, use lemon juice or sauce hollandaise. The very young shoots and leaves can also be eaten raw as a salad.





## Sea-kale and pasta

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2 handfuls of mixed stems, leaf-shoots and small flower-heads of sea-kale

500 g (1 lb) penne pasta

Chopped anchovies

2 tbs olive oil

Butter

Lemon juice

- Chop the sea-kale into 5 cm (2 inch) lengths and cook in boiling water for about 10 minutes.
- Add the penne to salted boiling water and simmer until just cooked (8–10 minutes).
- Drain the pasta, add the cooked sea-kale, a few chopped anchovies, the olive oil, a knob of butter and a squeeze of lemon. Stir and heat for a further 3 minutes, then serve.





## Crowberry

*Empetrum nigrum*

A small, creeping shrub, up to 30 cm (1 ft) over some of the northern moors of Britain. Leaves linear, edges rolled over. Flowers small, pink, April to June. Berries shiny black when ripe.

The fruits are used in arctic regions and probably have some value as a source of vitamin C. Although it is difficult to gather the fruit in any quantity some experimenters have enjoyed jelly made from it.





# Heather

*Calluna vulgaris*

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Widespread and abundant on heaths, moors, and dry, open woods on acid soils. An evergreen shrub up to 1 m (3 ft) high, with numerous tiny leaves in opposite rows. The flowers are purple and bell-shaped and carried in spikes, August to September.

Heather is the dominant plant over much of western Europe's upland moors and sandy wastes. In full flower – purple billows as far as the eye can see – a heather moor is a glorious sight. But it is also a deceptive one, for heather is a sign of a depleted soil and a harsh climate. Heather is a tenacious plant and completely carpets huge areas of moorland. Trample on it and you will make no impression on its wiry stems. Even extensive burning only sets it back temporarily, and within a couple of years new shoots spring up beside the blackened branches of the old.

Heather has an abundant range of economic uses. It provides food for sheep and grouse, material for fuel, thatching, basketwork and brooms, and an orange dye. Its flowers are rich in nectar, and beekeepers often transport their hives many miles to a stretch of moorland when the heather is in bloom. The dried flower-heads make a good tea, and Robert Burns is supposed to have drunk a 'moorland tea' based on heather tops mixed with the dried leaves of bilberry, blackberry, speedwell, thyme and wild strawberry.

Heather ale has a long history in Scotland, dating back to the Neolithic period. The tradition was revived commercially in the late twentieth century, and heather ale is now available under the Gaelic name of *Fraoch*. It is wonderfully fragrant, with scents of heather and honey.

## Heather beer

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Beer made from nectar dates back to early medieval times. Cut ½ gallon (2.25 litres) of heather flowers in full bloom, and boil in the same volume of water for an hour. Strain through a jelly bag, add to 1 lb (450g) of malt extract and ¼ lb (350g) of sugar, and stir until dissolved. Add a further gallon (4.5 litres) of water, and, when lukewarm, ½ oz (35g) yeast. Cover and leave in a warm place for a week. Then siphon into bottles, adding ½ teaspoon of sugar to each. Allow to clear and decant before drinking.

## Moorland tea

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Mix dried heather flowers with the dried leaves of bilberry, wild thyme and wild strawberry, and prepare as tea.









## Bilberry

*Vaccinium myrtillus*

Widespread throughout the British Isles, except the south and east of England, and locally abundant on heaths and moors. An erect shrub, growing 20–50 cm (8–20 inches) high, with hairless twigs and oval, slightly toothed, bright green leaves. Flowers solitary, drooping, greenish-pink globes. Fruits small, round and blue-black, covered with bloom, July to September.

Also known as whortleberries or whinberries, and in Scotland as blaeberrys, bilberries transport you more thoroughly into the role of the hunter-gatherer than perhaps any other wild food. The fruit is virtually unknown in cultivation – the blueberries bought from greengrocers and supermarkets are a larger and less flavoursome American species.

The bilberry is an intriguingly juicy and versatile fruit, and would doubtless be more popular commercially if picking it were not such a laborious business. The shrub grows low, often largely concealed by dense heather, and the

berries form in nothing like the concentrations of, say, blackberries. So even on the moors where the bush grows in abundance, gathering any quantity can involve the thorough searching of a fair-sized patch of land. On parts of mainland Europe, bilberry gathering has been partially mechanised with the help of a large combing device known as a *peigne*, though this not only damages the more fragile shoots and strips many of the leaves along with the berries but also takes away much of the fun of hunting for the berries – the discovery of clusters of fruit under the leaves, and one's fingers (and mouth) turning blue.

In Britain the wild fruit is still picked commercially on a small scale, particularly in the Welsh border country, where the berries are sold in markets. Bilberries can be used to make jams, jellies, stews and cheesecakes. They can be frozen, or left to stand in the sun for a week or so, by which time they will have dried sufficiently to keep over the winter.

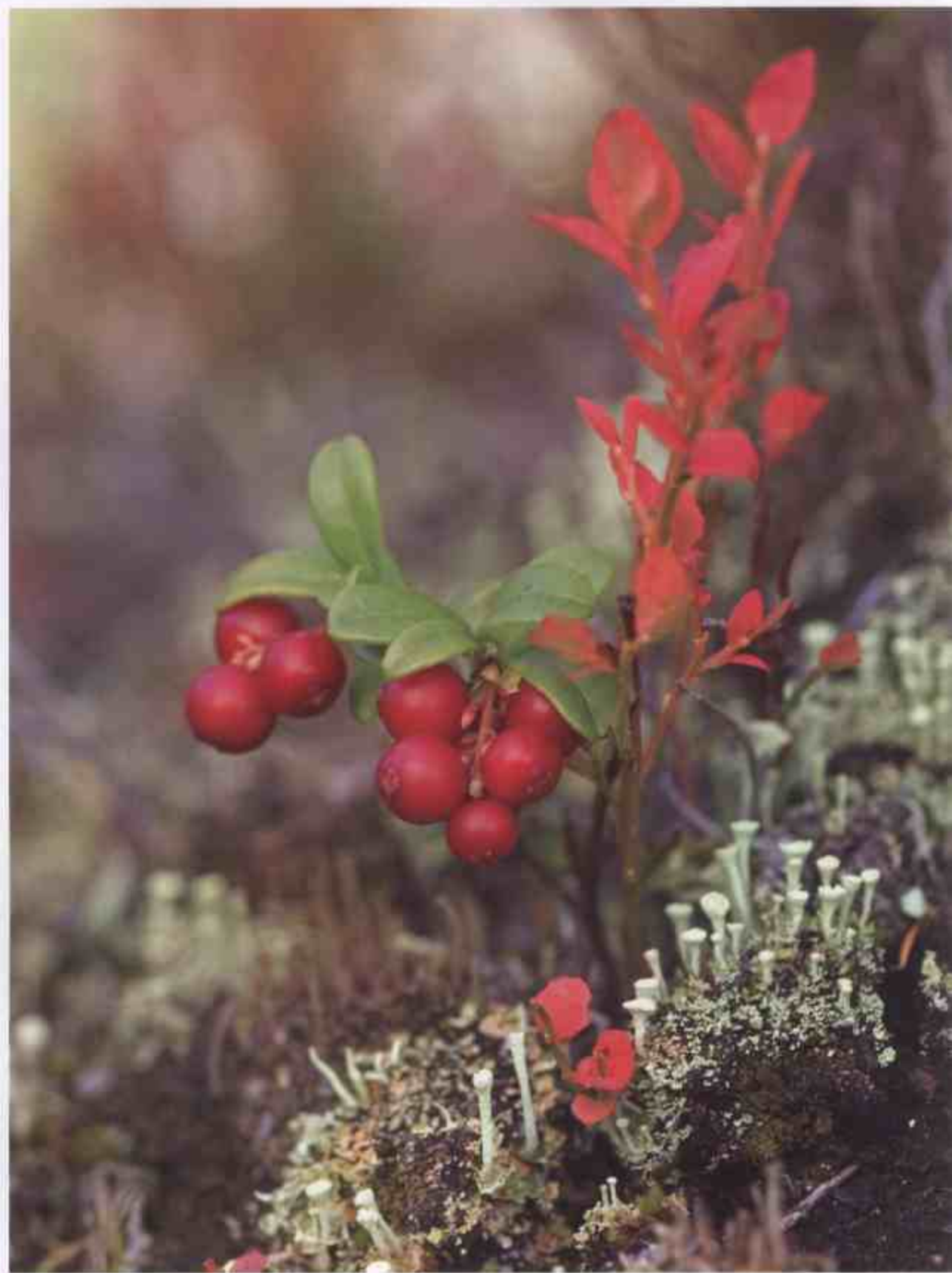
Some of the most interesting bilberry recipes come from Yorkshire, where the pies are known as 'mucky-mouth pies' because of the colour they give to tongues and lips. Another Yorkshire touch with bilberries is to add a few sprigs of mint to the stewed fruit and jams. The two flavours complement each other perfectly.

## Bilberry pudding

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A classic recipe which sets the berries in a kind of Yorkshire pudding.

- |                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| 100 g (4 oz) flour      | • Make a thinnish batter by beating the egg with the flour and then slowly adding the milk. |
| 1 egg                   |   |
| 1 large cup of milk     | • Stir in the sugar and the bilberries and pour into a greased tin.                         |
| 2 tbs brown sugar       |   |
| 200 g (8 oz) bilberries | • Bake in a medium oven for 30 minutes.   |



## Cranberry

*Vaccinium oxycoccos*

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A creeping, evergreen shrub of bogs and marshy heaths, up to 50 cm (20 inches) high. Leaves dark green, pointed, whitish beneath. Flowers pink with down-turned petals, June to August. Berries small, round, mottled red.

Cranberries were once more common in Britain. But the draining of much of our marsh and upland bog has robbed the plant of its natural wet habitats, and it is now largely confined to the north of England and Wales. The berry of the wild plant is inedible raw, and you are unlikely to find enough for cooking. But it can be made into sauce like the larger American species. In fact, its origins, name and traditional uses are solidly British, and the fruit is mentioned (as 'fenberry') in a herbal published in 1578. Like so much else, cranberry recipes were preserved by British settlers in America, and only later brought back into use here.

## Cowberry

*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*

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A small evergreen shrub of moorland bogs, 40 cm (16 inches) high. Leaves leathery, oval, untoothed. Flowers pink or white, in clusters, May to July. Berries red, spherical. (Opposite)

Also known as lingonberry, this little shrub is a close relative of the cranberry, and one of its names is in fact mountain cranberry. It grows on some moors in the northern parts of the British Isles, and more widely in northern Europe. The berries are popular in Sweden, where they are known as 'the red gold of the forests'. Like cranberries, the berries are sharp and scarcely edible when raw, and are usually made into jam or jelly (though they need some apple added for the pectin).

## Cowslip

*Primula veris*

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A low hairy perennial, 10–35 cm (4–14 inches) high, with flowers in clusters, April to May. Each flower is yellow, with orange spots in the centre. Widespread in meadows, chalk downland, road verges.

The cheerful, wobbly blossoms of the cowslip have made it one of our favourite flowers, and it has probably suffered more from overpicking than any other of our once-common meadow flowers. Yet its name hardly suggests such popularity. It is a euphemism for 'cowslop', no doubt an indication of the plant's liking for mucky fields. It was once widely used in kitchens, making one of the very best country wines, and a curious 'vinegar' which was drunk with soda water rather than being used as a condiment. (To show the devastation some of these recipes must have wreaked on flower populations, this particular recipe required two pints of cowslip blossoms to make a pint and a half of vinegar.)

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The picking of wild flowers is strongly discouraged these days because of declining populations. If you like the sound of any of the recipes, grow the plants in your garden – or even in a window box – and pick the flowers there. Many species, such as cowslip and primrose, are commercially available as seed.











## Primrose

*Primula vulgaris*

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A low hairy perennial, 10–25 cm (4–10 inches) high, with crinkly leaves and pale yellow flowers, March to May. Widespread throughout Europe, in woodland and on hedgebanks, railway embankments and cliffs.

The symbol of spring, with its pure, pale, delicately fragrant yellow flowers, the primrose can grow abundantly on chalk banks, shady woods, even on cliffs, but it is often greatly reduced near towns and cities because of uprooting. Primrose blossoms have mostly been used in similar ways to cowslips and violets – strewn on salads and on roast meats, candied, or made into wine.



## Redcurrant

*Ribes rubrum*

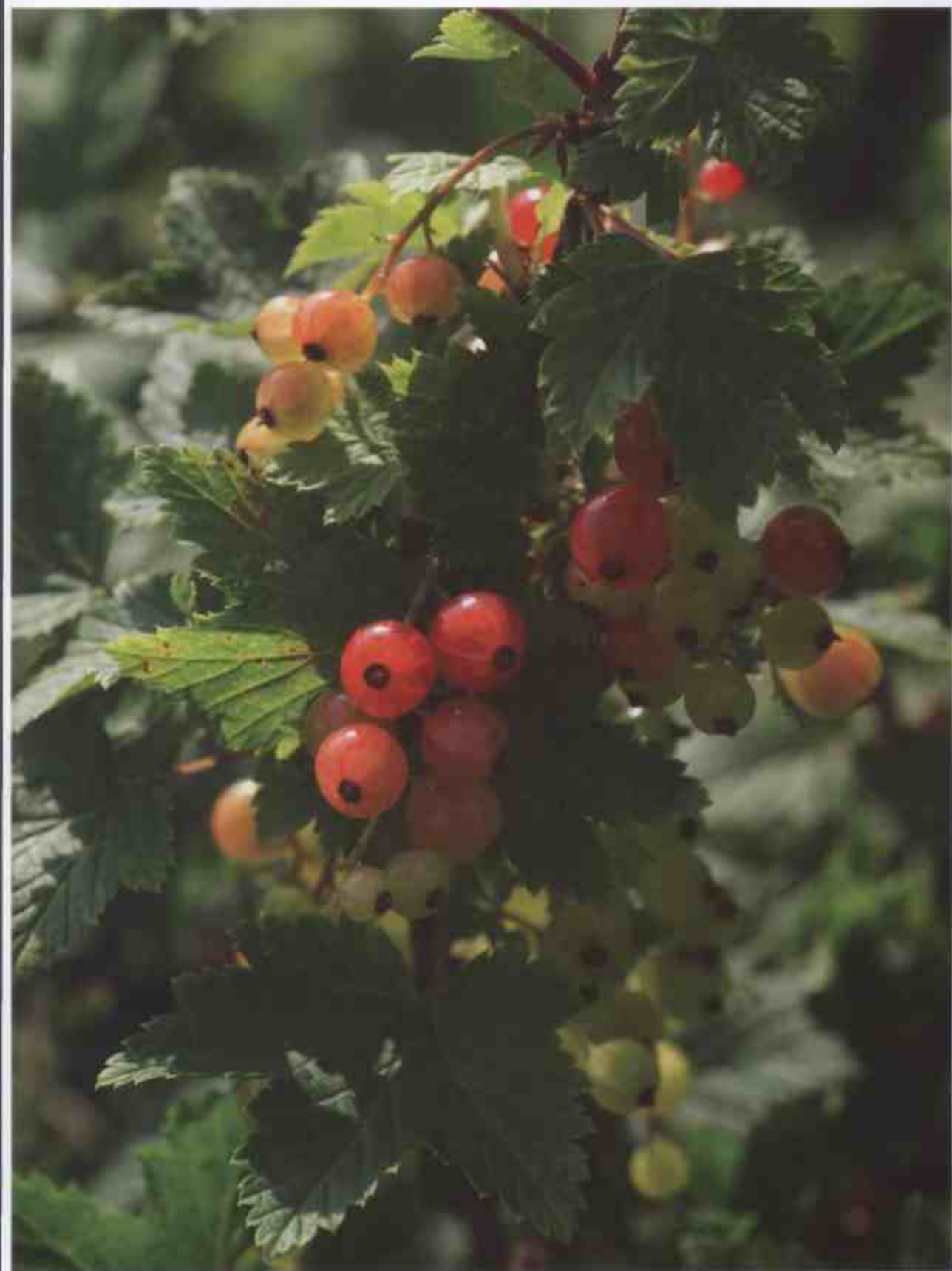
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Widespread but local in woods and hedgerows, especially by streams and fens. An erect shrub, up to 1.5 m (5 ft) high, with toothed leaves broken into 3 or 5 lobes, not aromatic. Flowers small, green and drooping, April and May. Fruits from July, round and shiny red, with a slightly translucent skin.

Some redcurrant bushes are blatant escapes from nearby gardens. But the plant is an authentic native, and truly wild specimens are not uncommon in old woodland, by stream banks and in rough fens.

The fruits appear from July, and are often much less red than their cultivated cousins. Avoid confusion with the cloying fruit of guelder-rose (*Viburnum opulus*). This is also a shrub of woods and riversides, but its berries lack a 'tail' and look heavy and waxy beside the almost translucent skins of the redcurrant.

Redcurrants make a good jelly, provided the rather obtrusive pips are strained out. But given that you will probably only find a few, they may be best eaten as a bracing field-snack, in what the fruit gourmet Edward Bunyard described as 'ambulant consumption'.





## Blackcurrant

*Ribes nigrum*

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Grows wild in damp woodland across the whole of Europe. An erect shrub, up to 1.5 m (5 ft) high, with lobed leaves which issue a heavy and characteristic smell when crushed. Flowers drooping, April and May. Dangling clusters of opaque black berries appear in June, ripening in July.

The soothing properties of blackcurrant juice were probably known long before the plant passed into cultivation, for it was often given against sore throats and 'the quinsy'. It is an uncommon plant in the wild, and can readily be told from redcurrant by its larger, heavily aromatic leaves. A few of these, dried, can transform a pot of Indian tea.

The currants can also be dried, and in this form they were one of the bases of pemmican, an Amerindian dish taken up by polar explorers. The currants were pounded together with dried meat, and the mixture bound together and coated with fat or tallow. The result was a food containing almost all the ingredients necessary for a balanced diet, which would keep well even on long journeys.



## Gooseberry

*Ribes uva-crispa*

Widespread but scattered in woods and hedgerows across most of Europe. A stubby, many-branched shrub, rarely growing more than 120 cm (4 ft) high, with 3- or 4-lobed, blunt-toothed leaves, and drooping, red-tinged, green flowers. Fruit greenish yellow, egg-shaped and usually hairy, from July.

Although some gooseberries found in the wild are naturalised from bird-sown garden varieties, the species is almost certainly native. The history of the gooseberry's domestication, from lowly hedgerow berry to luscious dessert fruit, is one of the most extraordinary stories of vernacular plant breeding. Cultivated gooseberries were unknown until late in the sixteenth century, yet by the end of the nineteenth there were as many as 2,000 named varieties. This was due almost entirely to the ingenuity of amateur growers, especially in the industrial Midlands, who were spurred on in their breeding programmes by annual competitions (still held in a few villages).

You will find wild gooseberries from early July onwards, and on some bushes (with the help of a pair of gloves, because of the spines) you may be able to pick a fair quantity, though they are irregular fruited. Depending on their ripeness and sweetness they can be used in any of the recipes which normally employ the cultivated fruit. The ripe berries make gooseberry pie or gooseberry fool, the underripe ones gooseberry jelly (see the recipe for elderflower and gooseberry preserve on p. 82).

Oldbury tarts, from Oldbury-on-Severn, were traditionally made with wild gooseberries and sold at the Whitsuntide fairs (though the berries can hardly have been ripe at this time, and preserved fruit must have been used). The tarts were actually small pies, tea-cup sized, filled with gooseberries and demerara sugar.

### Gooseberry and fennel sauce

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This requires only a small quantity of berries, and goes well with mackerel. Stew a handful of fruit in a little cider, pulp through a sieve, then mix with chopped fennel (p. 134). Add mustard and honey to taste.

### Gooseberry fool

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- |                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 1 cup wild gooseberries        | • Top and tail the gooseberries. Stew in the white wine and honey, and reduce until the mixture is the consistency of jam. |
| ½ cup double cream             |  |
| 2 glasses white wine           | • Whip the cream until stiff.  |
| 1 tbs honey                    |  |
| Wild rose petals<br>to garnish | • When the gooseberry mixture is cool, fold in the whipped cream and decorate with rose petals.                            |





## Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage

*Cbryosplenium oppositifolium*

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A low, creeping plant with a preference for the banks of springs and wet, shady mountainsides.

In the Vosges mountains the leaves of this golden-saxifrage are eaten under the name *cresson de roches*. It can be used as a green vegetable, but it is not common enough to justify picking, except where plentiful.



## Meadowsweet

*Filipendula ulmaria*

Widespread and often abundant throughout the British Isles, by fresh water, in fens and marshy places and damp woods. A hairy perennial, 60–120 cm (2–4 ft) high. Leaves toothed, dark green above, silvery grey below. Foamy clusters of cream-coloured flowers on stiff, reddish-tinged stems, June to October.

One of the most summery of all our wild plants. In July the frothy flower-heads of meadowsweet can transform a riverside meadow. The scent of the fresh flowers is warm and heady, that of the crushed leaves more clinically sharp. When dried, both parts of the plant smell of new-mown hay. It was these dried leaves that were used to give an especially aromatic bouquet to port, claret and mead, and it is to this function that the name 'meadowort' probably refers, rather than to its preference for growing in meadows. The leaves can be used for flavouring almost any sort of drink, and can double for woodruff (p. 276) if that plant is unobtainable.



# Raspberry

*Rubus idaeus*

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Widespread throughout the British Isles, and quite frequent in hedgerows, rocky woods, and heaths. A slender shrub, with usually unbranched arching stems growing up to 2 m (6 ft) high, and only very slightly spiny. Leaves toothed and oval, and often whitish below. Flowers small and white in drooping clusters. Fruit a rich red berry, formed by a number of drupelets, July to September.

Although many raspberry plants growing in the wild are bird-seeded from cultivated stock, the fruit is as authentic a British native as its close relative the blackberry. It is not difficult to see why, of the two, it was the raspberry that was taken into gardens. It grows more tidily and with greater restraint than the spiny, aggressive bramble. And this of course means that it has been less prolific in the wild – another good reason for nurturing the plant in the non-competitive security of the garden.

The raspberry is usually the first soft fruit to ripen, occasionally as early as the last weeks of June. If you have difficulty distinguishing young raspberries from unripe blackberries, look at the stems on which they are growing. The raspberry has woody, cane-like stems, comparatively smooth except for a few weak prickles; the blackberry has much coarser stems armed with a great number of strong prickles. The berries themselves are quite different in texture, even when they are similarly coloured. Raspberries have a matt, spongy surface, whilst blackberries are covered with a shiny, taut skin. And when fully ripe the raspberry comes away easily from its pithy core.

Raspberries are such a rich and substantial fruit that it would be a waste to make jelly from them. But simmered in their own juice for about a quarter of an hour, and then boiled to setting point with an equal weight of sugar, they make a fine jam. If you only find a handful of wild berries, use them for stuffing game birds, or to make the famous summer pudding.

Raspberry vinegar, which can be made by soaking 450 g (1 lb) of fruit in 500 ml (1 pint) of white wine vinegar for two or three days, is an important ingredient of nouvelle cuisine. But it has an ancient pedigree as a sauce for fruit dishes and a base for summer drinks, and as a popular domestic remedy for 'tickly' throats.

## Summer pudding

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8–10 slices of bread  
(brown or white)

Milk

600 g (1½ lb) summer  
fruits, such as raspberries,  
red and black currants

Sugar to taste

- Cut some fairly thin slices of bread and remove the crusts. Moisten with milk, and line the sides and bottom of a deep pudding basin with them. Make sure that the slices overlap well, so that they will hold together when turned out.
- Fill the basin with the fruit mixture, which should have been cooked for about 10 minutes and sweetened with sugar to taste.
- Cover the top with more slices of moistened bread, and then with greaseproof paper. Put a weight on top of the paper and leave the pudding to stand in the refrigerator overnight.
- Turn out and serve with crème fraîche or ice-cream.





## Blackberry, Bramble

*Rubus fruticosus*

Widespread and abundant in woods, hedges, waste places and heaths. A prickly shrub, usually growing in straggly, tangled clumps. The leaves are also prickly and toothed, and turn reddish-purple in the autumn. The flowers have 5 white or pinkish petals. The fruit is made up of a number of drupelets, and turns from green to red to a deep purple-black. It can be picked from August to October.

There is little need to write at length about this juicy purple berry, which has been known, loved and picked across the world for generations. Its seeds have even been found in the stomach of a Neolithic man dug up from the Essex clay. Blackberries have a special role in the relationship between townspeople and the countryside. It is not just that they are delicious, and easy to find. Blackberrying carries with it a little of the urban dweller's myth of country life: abundance, harvest, a sense of season, and just enough discomfort to quicken the senses. Maybe

it is the scuffing and the scratches that are the real attraction of blackberrying, the proof of satisfying toil against unruly nature.

Everyone has their favourite picking habits and recipes, and these are better guides than anything a book can say. So I will confine myself here to a few of the lesser known facts.

Blackberry bushes spread in a curious way. Each cane begins by growing erectly, but then curves downwards until its tip touches the ground. Here the shoot takes root, and a clump of new canes soon forms. The berries themselves grow in large clusters at the end of the older shoots, which die after two or three years' cropping. The lowest berry – right at the tip of the stalk – is the first to ripen, and is the sweetest and fattest of all. Eat it raw. A few weeks later, the other berries near the end ripen; these are less juicy, but are still good for jam and pies. The small berries farther up the stalk often do not ripen until October. They are hard and slightly bitter and are only really useful if cooked with some other fruit.

Even more variety is found from bush to bush. There are reckoned to be at least 400 microspecies in Britain, all differing slightly in flavour, sweetness, fruiting time, nutritional content and size. Blackberries can occur with the savours of grape, plum and even apple. Some varieties have more dietary fibre, weight for weight, than wholemeal bread. If any wild variety does take your fancy, try growing a cutting in the garden. It should bear fruit after a couple of years. There are any number of recipes which make use of blackberries. They can be made into pies, fruit fools and salads, jellies (they need a little extra pectin), and jams. A good way of serving them fresh is to leave them to steep overnight in red wine.

The most delicious blackberry product I know is a junket made from nothing other than blackberry juice. Remove the juice from the very ripest berries with the help of a juice extractor, or by pressing them through several layers of muslin. Then simply allow the thick, dark juice to stand undisturbed in a warm room. Do not stir or cool the juice, or add anything to it. In a few hours it will have set to the consistency of a light junket, and can be eaten with cream and sweet biscuits.

## Autumn pudding

Make as for summer pudding (see p. 180), but replace the bright red fruits with dark ones – blackberries especially, and also a few stoned sloes and damsons, elderberries, and chopped crab apples. Cook for about ten minutes and stir in dark honey or sugar to taste. Transfer the pulp to a deep pudding basin lined with slices of wholemeal bread, and pack in more bread until the pulp is covered. Put a weight on top and leave in the refrigerator overnight.







## Dewberry

*Rubus caesius*

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Widespread and frequent in bushy and grassy places, especially in eastern England. Hairy, sprawling perennial, up to 40 cm (16 inches) high, with weak prickles. (Opposite, top left and opposite, top right)

The dewberry carries smaller fruits than the blackberry. They have fewer segments and are covered with a fine bloom. They are also so juicy that they can be difficult to pick without bursting them. Take advantage of this juiciness and pick them as a kind of ready-made cocktail cherry. Snip a few of the best berries off with secateurs, together with about 8 cm (3 inches) of stalk. Serve them with their 'sticks' intact, ready for dipping in bowls of sugar and cream.

## Cloudberry

*Rubus chamaemorus*

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This little shrub, which grows not much more than 15 cm (6 inches) high, is a relative of the blackberry. It grows in patches on damp peatland soils. Fruit red at first, orange when ripe. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)

Sadly, the cloudberry has always been a shy fruiter in this country (unlike Scandinavia, for instance, where it is highly prized). It is a subalpine and arctic species, confined to bogs and moors in Scotland and the north of England and Wales. In the Berwyn mountains in north Wales, an unusual tradition commemorated this scarcity, and persisted up to the end of the nineteenth century. Shepherds from Llanrhaiadr believed that a quart of cloudberry was the wage that St Dogfan was due for his spiritual ministry, and anyone who could bring such a quantity to the parson on St Dogfan's Day had his tithes remitted for the year. Cloudberry has been used in northern areas of Britain for puddings or jams, and could be included in any dish that is conventionally made from blackberries or raspberries.



## Silverweed

*Potentilla anserina*

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An abundant flower of damp grassy and waste places. A hairy, creeping perennial, 10–30 cm (4–12 inches) high. Leaves in a basal rosette, coarsely toothed. Flowers yellow, five-petaled, May to September.

The undersides of the leaves are flashed with a pale matt grey, making the plant look withered before its time. The upper surface is a silky, liquid green. The leaves were once used by foot soldiers as an apparently cooling lining for their boots. The whole plant has a history of medicinal and culinary use going back to the ancient Greeks.

The roots were cultivated as a crop from late prehistoric times. In upland areas of Britain they were eaten right up until the introduction of the potato – and later, in times of famine, though they are a meagre and not very flavour-some root. The seventeenth century botanist John Ray likened their taste to parsnip. The roots were boiled, baked, or even eaten raw; they were also dried and ground into flour for bread and gruel. Silverweed is worth bringing into your garden for its ambivalent leaves and yellow, utilitarian flowers. If you do, some of those old famine recipes for the roots are worth reviving.





## Wild Strawberry

*Fragaria vesca*

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**Widespread and frequent on grassy banks, heaths, open woods throughout Europe. A low, creeping plant with hairy runners and stems 5–30 cm (2–12 inches). The leaves are in groups of three, toothed, shiny green above and silky grey beneath. The fruits are small drooping red berries with the seeds protruding, late June to September.**

In some parts of the country wild strawberries are abundant, and carpet wide patches of dry and heathy ground. But normally you will need to search carefully for them, looking for the trefoil leaves in woodland clearings and rough grass. The drooping berries can be even more elusive, and are often completely hidden by the leaves. Always look under the leaves as well as on top of the plant when picking wild strawberries. Wild strawberries prefer chalky soils, and the best fruits are those eaten straight from plants growing on bare limestone. They will have been warmed up by the sun reflected from the rock, and their fragrance can be savoured to the full. What the wild strawberry lacks in size it more than makes up for in flavour. The ripe fruits are wonderfully concentrated beads of sweetness, which our ancestors appreciated in much the same way as we do. The most useful recipes are those which make the best of small quantities of berries. Try a wine-glassful topped with champagne. Add a few to a fresh fruit salad – or a green salad, for that matter. Or make use of their winery aroma by turning them into a sauce for other fruit, especially raspberries or peaches. Simply purée them with a little wine, pepper and sugar. The first wild strawberries overlap with the last of the asparagus, and I once came across an intriguing combination of these two plants, plus prawns, in a Japanese restaurant. They were served mixed in an egg roll. Take equal quantities of wild strawberries, asparagus tips and small prawns. Blanch the asparagus in boiling water for about 3 minutes, and drain. Mix with the other two ingredients, and use to make a frittata as in the recipe for hop shoots on p 37. Fold or roll the cooked frittata if you wish.



## Herb-bennet, Wood Avens

*Geum urbanum*

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An undistinguished plant, yet it is pleasant in late summer to find its small five-petalled yellow flowers on an otherwise dark woodland floor.

The clove-like odour of the roots of herb-bennet was once reputed to repel moths; yet it clearly attracted human beings, for it was widely grown as a pot-herb in the sixteenth century. As well as its many medicinal uses (against 'the stings of venomous beasts') it was also added to broths and soups.



## Salad Burnet

*Sanguisorba minor*

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Quite common in grassy places on chalk. A hairless perennial, 20–90 cm (8–36 inches), with four to twelve pairs of oval, toothed leaves. Flowers green, reddish or purplish, May to August.

When crushed, the leaves of the salad burnet smell slightly of cucumber. They have long been used as an ingredient of salads, in spite of their diminutive size and slight bitterness, and as a garnish for summer drinks. Sir Francis Bacon recommended that salad burnet should be planted in herb gardens with wild thyme and water mint, 'to perfume the air most delightfully, being trodden on and crushed'. A recipe reputedly enjoyed by Napoleon whilst he was in exile on St Helena was a salad of cooked haricot beans, dressed with a generous mixture of olive oil and green herbs – salad burnet (*pimprelles* in French), tarragon, chives, parsley and chervil.



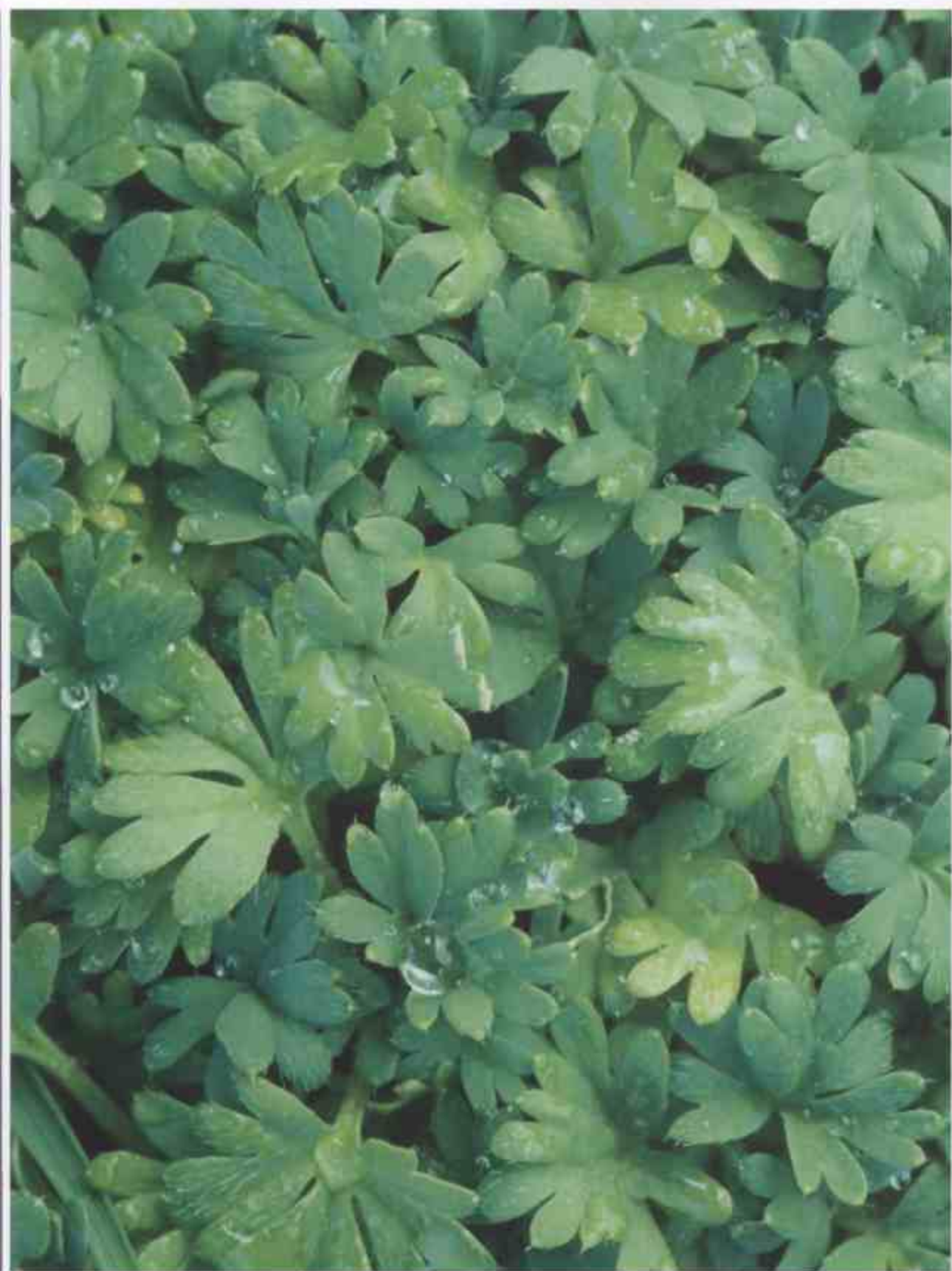
## Parsley-piert

*Aphanes arvensis*

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**Widespread and common on arable and dry ground. Very low, hairy, pale green annual with lobed, toothed leaves. Flowers tiny, green, in clusters, April to October.**

The curious name of this plant probably derives from *perce-pierre*, a plant which breaks through stony ground. So, by sympathetic magic, it came to be used medicinally as a specific against kidney stones. Yet it was Culpeper of all people, herbal wizard extraordinary, who first recommended it as an honest domestic pickle. Best as a small-scale addition to salads.



## Wild Rose, Dog-rose

*Rosa canina*

Widespread and common in hedges, scrubland, waste places, but less frequent in Scotland. A thorny plant with arching stems up to 3 m (10 ft) high, with hooked prickles, toothed leaves, and large, white to pink, five-petalled flowers, June and July. The fruit (rosehip) is an orange-red, oblong berry, sometimes as much as 2.5 cm (1 inch) long, and is on the bushes between late August and November.

The wild rose has a simpler and less showy blossom than the garden rose and scarcely droops before it sheds its petals. This is the stage when wild roses should be gathered. Never pick or damage the young flowers. Towards the end of July look for those that have already lost one or two petals, and then gently remove the others into your basket.

Wild roses have a more delicate scent than the garden varieties, but still some of that fleshy, perfumed texture. So if you have only a small quantity, use them neat in salads. Frances Perry once listed ten other uses for the petals: rose wine, rose in brandy, rose vinegar, rhubarb and rose-petal jam, rose honey, rose and coconut candies, Turkish delight, rose drops, crystallised rose petals, and rose-petal jelly. The list could be extended indefinitely, because the basis of the use of rose-petals, here as elsewhere, is simply as a fragrant improver of well-established dishes. The tips of the young, green stem are also edible and taste a little of apple.

### Rose-petal jam

Extensively eaten in the Middle East, especially with yoghurt; this recipe is from Turkey. You will only need to prepare a small potful, as it is exceedingly sweet. And only supplement your wild petals with those from garden roses if it is absolutely necessary to make up the quantity: the thick, fleshy petals of the garden damasks are very difficult to reduce to jelly.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 2 cups wild rose petals<br>(crammed down fairly<br>tightly) | • Dissolve the sugar in the water, and add the lemon<br>juice and orange juice.  |
| 2 cups sugar  | • Make sure that the rose petals are free of insects,<br>and discard any withered ones.  |
| 1 cup water   | • Stir the petals into the liquid and put the pan<br>over a very low heat. Stir continuously for about<br>30 minutes, or until all the petals have 'melted'. |
| 1 tbs lemon juice   | • Cool a little, pour into a small glass jar and cover.  |
| 1 tbs orange juice  |  |











## Rosehips

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The fruit of the wild rose, the hip, is the star of one of the great success stories of wild food use. It is the only completely wild fruit to have supported a national commercial enterprise – the production of rosehip syrup.

The austerity of the Second World War, when supplies of citrus fruits were virtually cut off, forced the British government to exploit the potential of rosehips as a source of vitamin C. But the fruit had been used as a food for centuries before that. When cultivated fruit was scarce in the Middle Ages, rosehips were used as a dessert. A recipe from 1730 explains how this hard, unlikely berry was transformed into a filling for tarts. The hips were first split in half, and the pith and seeds thoroughly cleaned out. Then the skins were put to stand in an earthenware pot until they were soft enough to rub through a sieve. (Notice that this was done without the use of any heat or liquid.) The resulting purée was mixed with its own weight of sugar, warmed until the sugar melted, and then potted.

In 1941 the Ministry of Health put forward a scheme for collection of rosehips, which had been found to contain twenty times the amount of vitamin C in oranges, and in that year 120 tons were gathered by voluntary collectors. The next year the scheme was transferred to the Vegetable Drugs Committee of the Ministry of Supply and 344 tons were gathered. By 1943 the redoubtable County Herb Committees were brought in to organise the collection, and for the next three years the harvest averaged 450 tons. The resulting syrup was sold through ordinary retailers at a controlled price of 1s 9d a six-ounce (170 ml) bottle. Mothers and children were able to obtain it in larger quantities, and at reduced prices, from Welfare Clinics.

Rosehip syrup stayed in the shops through the 1960s and 1970s, but it is now commercially available only from specialist suppliers. Rosehip syrup is really the beginning of all useful rosehip recipes, and making it is the simplest way of filtering out the prickly seed, which can be a dangerous internal irritant. Here, as a nostalgic but highly functional guide, are the meticulous directions given by the Ministry of Food during the Second World War for 900 g (2 lb) of hips. The resulting syrup can be used as a flavouring for milk puddings, ice-cream or almost any sweet, or diluted as a drink.

## Rosehip syrup

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Have ready 3 pints (1.5 litres) of boiling water, mince the hips in a coarse mincer, drop immediately into the boiling water or if possible mince the hips directly into the boiling water and again bring to the boil. Stop heating and place aside for 15 minutes. Pour into a flannel or linen crash jelly bag and allow to drip until the bulk of the liquid has come through. Return the residue to the saucepan, add 1½ pints (750 ml) of boiling water, stir and allow to stand for 10 minutes. Pour back into the jelly bag and allow to drip. To make sure all the sharp hairs are removed put back the first half cupful of liquid and allow to drip through again. Put the mixed juice into a clean saucepan and boil down until the juice measures about 1½ pints (750 ml), then add 1½ lbs (900 g) of sugar and boil for a further 5 minutes. Pour into hot sterile bottles and seal at once. If corks are used these should have been boiled for ½ hour just previously and after insertion coated with melted paraffin wax. It is advisable to use small bottles as the syrup will not keep for more than a week or two once the bottle is opened. Store in a dark cupboard.

*Hedgerow Harvest, Ministry of Food, 1943*





## Bitter-vetch

*Lathyrus linifolius*

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A short, erect, hairless perennial with winged stems, up to 40 cm (16 inches), found in damp grassland and open woods. Purple-red flowers, fading to blue, April to July.

An edible tuber from the pea family, bitter-vetch is one of the commoner species, and sometimes grows in abundance in heathy areas. It has been recognised as a vegetable since at least the Middle Ages. In later times the roots were used as a subsistence crop in the Scottish islands, either raw or dried. They have also been used for flavouring whisky.

## Restharrow

*Ononis repens*

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Hairy, sticky, spreading perennial, 10–70 cm (4–28 inches), found in lime-rich soil in grassland, shingle, sand dunes. Loose clusters of pink-purple flowers, June to September. (Opposite, top left and opposite, top right.)

A common enough plant in dry and chalky grassland, but too handsome to pick needlessly. It is like a sweet pea bred for the rockery: short, pert and bushy. In the north children would dig up the roots and chew them; hence it acquired the names wild liquorice and Spanish root.

## Rosebay Willowherb

*Chamerion angustifolium*

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Widespread and abundant in woodland clearings and on waste ground, especially where there has been fire. Pink flowers in dramatic spikes up to 1.5 m (5 ft) high, June to September. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)

The young shoots have been eaten like asparagus in parts of America and northern Europe, though they are very bitter.





## Large-flowered Evening-primrose

*Oenothera glazioviana*

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A tall, downy flower, up to 1.8 m (6 ft), with a fine poppy-like yellow blossom. (Opposite, top left and opposite, top right.)

Introduced from America into Britain in the early seventeenth century, and soon taken into gardens for its roots, which were eaten boiled. In Germany the young shoots were also eaten.

## Dwarf Cornel

*Cornus suecica*

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A short, creeping perennial, up to 20 cm (8 inches), found on upland moors. Purplish flowers appear in June to August. The fruits are red. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)

The one aperitif in this book. The small scarlet berries used to be munched by the Highlanders to stimulate their appetites. Dwarf cornel is rare, and there are more agreeable ways to perk up your appetite, so this rare plant should be left unpicked. Only in a few areas in the Highlands does it still thrive under the shelter of heather and bilberry.



## Dog's Mercury

*Mercurialis perennis*

 POISONOUS

A low, unbranched, downy perennial, often growing in large colonies in woods, and under ancient hedgebanks. Tassels of small, yellowish green flowers in early spring. Dog's Mercury contains an intensely irritant poison which can damage the liver and kidneys as well as the stomach. (Opposite, top left and opposite, top right.)

## Spurge

*Euphorbia* species

 POISONOUS

Modest-looking plants commonly regarded as weeds. Yellowish-green flowers from April to September, depending on the species. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)

The majority of our native spurges are poisonous. They exude a milky juice which can produce intense irritation of the lips and mouth, and act as a drastic purgative if swallowed. Sun spurge, *Euphorbia helioscopia*, dwarf spurge, *Euphorbia exigua*, and petty spurge, *Euphorbia peplus*, are the commonest species.



## Wood-sorrel

*Oxalis acetosella*

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Widespread and common throughout the British Isles in woods and other shady places. A low, creeping plant, 5–15 cm (2–6 inches) high. Leaves shamrock-shaped, and lime green when young. Flowers April to May, five white petals on a delicate stem.

Wood-sorrel is a plant principally of ancient deciduous woods, but it can tolerate the shade and acid soils of evergreen plantations better than many species, and often survives coniferisation. On the otherwise dark and barren floors the leaves of the wood-sorrel can appear an almost luminous viridian. They lie in scattered clusters amongst the needles, like fretwork. Gerard Manley Hopkins described the new leaves as having the sharp appearance of green lettering. They are folded to begin with, in the shape of an episcopal hat, then open flat, three hearts with their points joined at the stem.

The leaves of wood-sorrel have an agreeably sharp, fruity taste, a little like the skins of young grapes, and they were in use as a salad vegetable certainly as early as the fourteenth century. By the fifteenth century wood-sorrel was under cultivation, and in the seventeenth John Evelyn recommended it in a list of plants suitable for the kitchen garden.

Its use then was as an ingredient for salads, or pulped with sugar as a sauce for meat and fish. It can be used the same way today, but sparingly, since it contains certain oxalates which are not too good for the body in large quantities. It is these salts which are responsible for the plant's pleasantly sharp taste. In the United States, other members of the *Oxalis* family (such as the yellow-flowered *Oxalis stricta*) are widely used, especially as flavourings for cakes.











## Jewel-weed, Orange Balsam

*Impatiens capensis*

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The jewel-weed or orange balsam is an increasingly frequent plant along the banks of rivers and canals in the south of England. It can often form magnificent bushes, up to 120 cm (4 ft) high and festooned with mottled orange nasturtium-like bells.

Jewel-weed is an introduction from North America and was not found in the wild in this country until 1822. In its native land the young leaves and stems were used as a vegetable. The green seed-pods and seeds of another immigrant balsam, the Himalayan balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) are also eaten in their native Asian habitats. They make a refreshingly nutty snack.



## Sea-holly

*Eryngium maritimum*

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Locally common on sandy and shingle beaches. A thistle-like perennial, 20–60 cm (8–24 inches) high, with spiny, ice-blue leaves covered with bloom and ribbed and edged with a fine white tracery of veins. Flowers blue, in rounded heads with spiny bracts, June to August.

A beautiful plant of the seashore which has suffered much for the sake of holidaymakers' vases. Sea-holly likes the rough ground of sandy and shingle beaches, and its roots have consequently been confused more than once with those of the vitriolic horned-poppy. Sea-holly roots, known as eryngo roots, were once extensively used for making candied sweetmeats. The roots – which could be up to 2 m (6 ft) long – were dug up in the spring or autumn, partly boiled until they could be peeled and then cut into thin slices. These were cooked with an equal weight of sugar until the latter became syrup, when the roots were removed and allowed to cool. Candied eryngo roots were a vital ingredient of that redoubtable Elizabethan dish, marrow-bone pie. They were also roasted, when they acquired something of the flavour of chestnuts.

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Note that under the Wildlife and Countryside Act it is now illegal to dig up wild plants by the root, except on your own land, or with the permission of the landowner.



## Cow Parsley

*Anthriscus sylvestris*

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Widespread and abundant on footpaths, roadsides, banks etc. An erect, leafy, branched perennial, usually about 1 m (3 ft) high, with hollow, green, furrowed stems, hairy near the bottom of the plant but smooth above. The leaves are grass-green, slightly downy, and much divided, resembling wedge-shaped ferns. Umbels of tiny white flowers, April to June.

No plant shapes our roadside landscape more than cow parsley. In May its lacy white flowers teem along every path and hedgebank. It grows prolifically; road verges can be blanketed with it for miles on end, and can be broadened several feet by its overhanging foliage.

Yet it has been almost totally overlooked as a herb, even though one of its less common names is wild chervil. It is a relative of cultivated chervil (*Anthriscus cerefolium*), a little coarser than that garden variety, maybe, but sharing something of its fresh, spicy flavour.



Cow parsley is the first common umbellifer to come into flower in the spring, and this is often enough to identify it positively. But since there are a number of related species which resemble it, and which can cause serious poisoning, I have included below some notes on the characteristics which unequivocally identify cow parsley. The most dangerous sources of confusion are fool's parsley (see p. 233) and hemlock (p. 239).

Cow parsley grows up to 1.2 m (4 ft) tall, and never as high as hemlock, which can reach 2.1 m (7 ft) or more. Fool's parsley is an altogether more flimsy shrub, rarely exceeding 30 cm (1 ft). Cow parsley's stem is stout, furrowed and slightly hairy, as against hemlock's purple-spotted stems and the thin, hairless, stems of fool's parsley. In addition, hemlock has an offensive, mousy smell when any part of it is bruised, and fool's parsley has unmistakable drooping green bracts beneath the flower-heads, giving them a rather bearded appearance. Note, however, that these few pointers are in no way a substitute for a well-illustrated field guide; they are merely intended to bring out the most prominent and useful differentiating characteristics.

You should pick cow parsley as soon as the stems are sufficiently developed for you to identify it. Later in the year it becomes rather bitter. It dries well, so pick enough to last you through the off-season as well as for your immediate needs. But do not gather the plant from the sides of major roads, where it will have been contaminated by car exhausts.

Chervil is a very versatile herb, and small quantities make a lively addition to most sorts of salads, particularly cold potato, tomato and cucumber. It also makes a good flavouring for hot haricot beans, and, with chopped chives, tarragon and parsley, the famous omelette aux fines herbes.

A second crop of non-flowering leaves often appears in the autumn and remains green throughout the winter, and those experienced enough to tell the plant from its leaves alone could do worse than pick some fresh for winter soups and casseroles. It goes well with hot baked potatoes, and as an addition to the French country dish *carroulet*.

Species	Size	Stem
Cow parsley	up to 1.2 m (4 ft)	Stout, pale green, furrowed, slightly hairy
Fool's parsley	up to 0.5 m (1 ½ ft)	Thin, hairless, ribbed
Hemlock	up to 2.1 m (7 ft)	Stout, smooth, purple-spotted

## Sweet Cicely

*Myrrhis odorata*

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Quite common on waysides and stream banks in the north of England and Scotland. An aromatic, hairy, branched perennial which grows to 1–1.5 m (4–5 ft). Leaves elegant, feathery, aniseed-scented when crushed. Large umbels of white flowers, May to July.

Cicely is one of the few plants where the connotation 'sweet' refers as much to taste as to scent. The feathery leaves have distinctly sugary overtones to their mild aniseed flavour, and are ideal for flavouring stewed fruits such as gooseberries and plums.

The species was probably introduced to Britain by the Romans, and in some places it is still known as the 'Roman plant'. It is now widely naturalised in northern Britain, and makes a handsome show on roadsides against a backdrop of drystone walls. The sixteenth-century herbalist Gerard was a great fan, and recommended both the roots (boiled) and the leaves (in salads). But he regarded the seeds as the plant's choicest part: 'Eaten as a sallad whilest they are yet greene, with oyle, vinegar and pepper, they exceed all other sallads by many degrees, both in pleasantness of taste, sweetnesse of smell, and wholesomeness for the cold and feeble stomach.'

The long green seeds can be eaten straight from the plant in June. They are up to 2.5 cm (1 inch) long and resemble miniature gherkins. Their crisp texture and sweet-and-sour aniseed taste make them an excellent wayside nibble, or an excellent foil to bread and cheese on a picnic.

In France, the young leaf-sprays are dipped in batter and fried as an hors d'oeuvre. Sweet cicely is also one of the herbs used in the making of Chartreuse, and in Cumbria the leaves were once used to polish oak doors.



# Coriander

*Coriandrum sativum*

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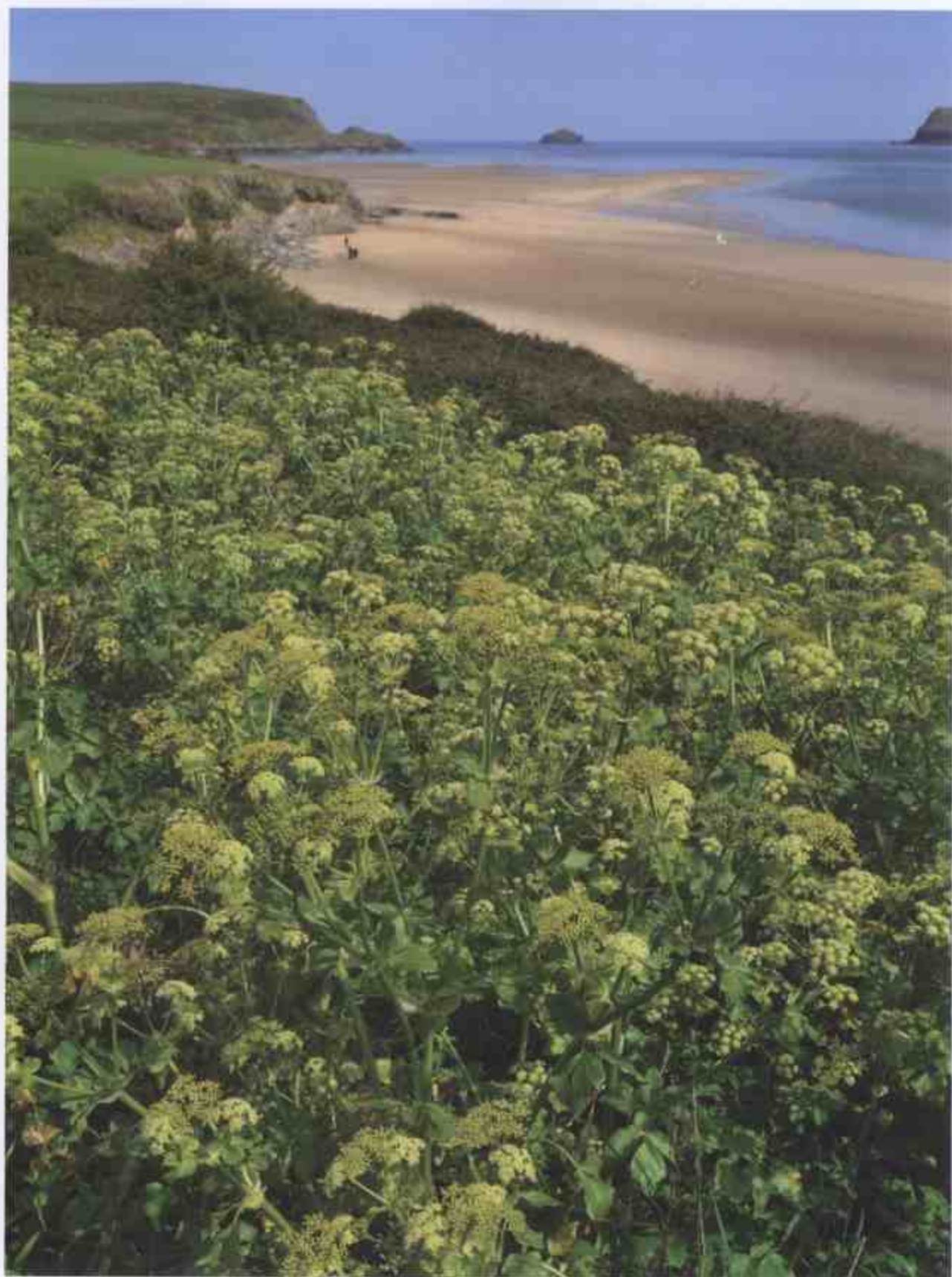
Short, hairless annual, up to 50 cm (20 inches) tall, bearing white flowers which appear in June to August. Fruit red-brown, ridged, aromatic when crushed.

When you come across a green coriander plant, it is difficult to believe that it will eventually produce those warmly aromatic seeds that are used so extensively in curries. The flavour of the green leaves is strong, slightly soapy and reminiscent of rue. But the smell and taste can grow on you, and the leaves are popular additions to Mediterranean salads and stews.

Coriander was probably brought to the British Isles from its native Mediterranean habitat by the Romans, and it is naturalised here in a few scattered places on waste ground. The dried seeds are mentioned in Exodus and are one of the oldest-known spices. Ground up, they are an essential ingredient of most curries, and will add a subtle flavour to soups, and, above all, to pork dishes. Len Deighton's recommendation: 'Hurl crushed coriander seeds into any open pot you see!'







## Alexanders

*Smyrniolum olusatrum*

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Widespread and locally abundant in hedgebanks and waste places, especially near the sea. A bushy, solid-stemmed hairless plant growing up to 120 cm (4 ft) high. Leaves glossy, toothed, in groups of three at the end of the leaf stalk, the other end being joined to the main stem by a substantial sheath. Umbels of yellow-green flowers, April to June.

The Romans brought alexanders to this country from the Mediterranean, as a pot-herb – the ‘parsley of Alexandria’. It thrived, became naturalised, and was still being planted in kitchen gardens in the early eighteenth century. Today it is widely naturalised in hedgebanks near the coast. It sprouts early and rapidly in the spring, and its bright, glossy leaves can sometimes be seen pushing through January snows.

The young leaves make a spicy addition to salads, and the flower-buds can be pickled, but the most succulent part of the plant is the stem. You should cut those leaf-stems which grow near the base of the plant, where they are thick and have been partially blanched by the surrounding grass or the plant’s own foliage. You should be able to cut about 15 cm (6 inches) of pinkish stalk from each stem (discarding the greener bits). Don’t be put off by the plant’s rather cloying angelica smell; this moderates with cooking.

### Cooked alexanders

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Blanch the stems by plunging into boiling water for about 3 minutes. Discard the water, drain, then simmer for 10 minutes in fresh water. Eat them like asparagus, with molten butter. They have a delicate texture, and a pleasantly aromatic taste.

## Pignut

*Conopodium majus*

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Occurs on well-drained soils in grassland and woodland. A slender, single-stemmed perennial, 20–80 cm (8–32 inches) high. Leaves feathery with narrow lobes. Flowers white, in dense, flat heads, May to July.

This slender, feathery umbellifer is still common in June and July in woods, meadows and sandy heaths, but of course it is now illegal to dig it up except on your own land. Once, pignuts (or earth nuts) were one of the most popular of children's wayside nibbles, even though extracting them from the ground was as delicate a business as an egg and spoon race. They cannot be pulled out, for the thin stalk breaks off very quickly. The fine white roots must be unearthed with a knife, and carefully traced down to the tuber, which lies about 10–20 cm (4–8 inches) below the surface.

The roundish 'nuts', dark brown and the size of walnuts, can be eaten raw, once they have been scraped or washed, and taste somewhere between hazelnuts and celery. One early botanist recommended them peeled and boiled in broth with pepper. They were also added to stews, when the taste reputedly becomes more like parsnip. Pignuts are worth trying if you have legal access to the roots.





## Ground-elder, Goutweed

*Aegopodium podagraria*

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Widespread and common in shady places on waste ground, under hedges, in gardens, throughout Europe. A perennial forming large patches 30–100 cm (1–3 ft) high. Leaves finely toothed, in groups of three at the end of the leaf stems. Flowers June to August, white umbels on a hairless stem.

Though no relation of the elder, goutweed's leaves do bear a superficial resemblance to those of the common and similarly prolific tree. It can often be found in quite large patches by roadsides and under garden hedges, its pale green leaves making a bright carpet in the shady places. Its continued presence in both habitats is a telling example of the persistence of some weeds in places where they were once cultivated and valued.

Ground elder was probably introduced to Britain by the Romans. In the Middle Ages it was grown in gardens as a vegetable, and at roadside inns and monasteries as a supposed quick palliative for travellers' gout. Advances in medical understanding put paid to the second of these functions, and the growing preference for milder-tasting, fuller-leaved vegetables to the first. Any popularity ground elder still retained was finally undermined by the imperialistic tendencies of its rootstock, which would quickly take over its host's garden. Even in the sixteenth century, when the plant was still being used as a pot-herb, John Gerard wrote complainingly of it that 'once taken roote, it will hardly be gotten out again, spoiling and getting every yeere more ground, to the annoying of better herbes' – a sentiment which many modern gardeners will echo. In fact, one way of getting back at the invader is to eat it. Cooked like a spinach, for about five minutes, it makes an unusual vegetable. Its tangy, aromatic flavour, though, is not to everyone's taste, so it is as well to try it in small quantities first.



## Rock Samphire

*Critbnum maritimum*

Frequent on rocky coasts in the south and west. A squat, bushy plant growing up to 30 cm (1 ft) high. Stems hairless and solid, leaves fleshy, grey-green and cut into narrow untoothed leaflets. Flowers are yellow umbels, July to October.

This is the plant whose precarious cliff-face gathering Shakespeare called a 'dreadful trade' in *King Lear*. Its name is confusing, for the plant bears no sort of relation to marsh samphire, *Salicornia europaea*. Even the habitats are different. Rock samphire has a preference for the side of cliffs, and it was from this habitat that it was often gathered along with gulls' eggs. From Dover and the Isle of Wight samphire was despatched in casks of brine to London, where in the nineteenth century wholesalers would pay up to four shillings a bushel for it. The plant also grows quite frequently in shingle, and you can often find it by its smell alone, warm but slightly sulphurous.

Both stems and leaves can be used, but before cooking remove any leaves that have begun to turn slimy, and any hard parts of the stalk. Then boil in water for about ten minutes, and serve with melted butter. To eat, suck the fleshy parts away from the stringy veins.

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## Rock samphire pickle

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Soak the samphire in water for 2–3 hours, drain and then cook briefly in wine vinegar, water and salt. Cool and store in jars with fresh vinegar, water and salt so it remains green.

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## Rock samphire hash

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This curious recipe dates from the mid-seventeenth century. This sauce was used as a garnish for meat, and the whole dish dressed with fresh samphire leaves and bright red barberries.

100 g (4 oz) samphire,  
chopped  
1 handful diced pickled  
cucumber and capers  
500 ml (1 pint) stock  
2 tbs wine vinegar  
1 lemon  
Slivers of butter  
1 egg yolk  
Pepper and nutmeg  
to taste

- Mix the chopped samphire with the pickled cucumbers and capers.
- Mix the stock with the wine vinegar, the juice and grated peel of the lemon, and pepper and nutmeg. Bring to the boil and then add the samphire. Simmer for half an hour.
- Take off the boil and gradually add slivers of butter and the egg yolk, stirring constantly until the mixture thickens.



## The Water-dropworts

 POISONOUS

*Oenanthe* species

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Responsible for the majority of fatalities from wild plant poisoning in this country – often from European visitors mistaking the roots for parsnips, etc. All species – including tubular water-dropwort (*O. fistulosa*) fine-leaved water-dropwort (*O. aquatica*) and parsley water-dropwort (*O. lachnanii*) – are deadly poisonous, often rapidly and suddenly.

The commonest and most widespread species is hemlock water-dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*), below. It is widespread and locally common in or by fresh water. A stout, hairless plant, up to 120 cm (4 ft) high, often forming clumps. The stem is usually hollow, and the foliage glossy, divided and smelling pleasantly of parsley. Flowers June to August, large white umbels.



## Fool's Parsley

*Aethusa cynapium*

 POISONOUS

A low, weak, hairless annual, often growing as a weed in gardens and other cultivated ground. Parsley-like foliage, and flowers in white umbels, over a distinctive ring of bracts which makes them look bearded. The plant has a distasteful smell which puts off most pickers, but poisoning has occasionally occurred. It is rarely fatal in healthy subjects.



## Fennel

*Foeniculum vulgare*

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Locally distributed throughout the south of England, Midlands, East Anglia and Wales. Less common in the north and Scotland. Occurs on cliffs, waste ground and damp places, especially near the sea. Tall, greyish perennial to 2 m (6 ft). Leaves thread-like and aromatic. Flowers early June to October; clusters of mustard-yellow blossoms.

See fennel's feathery sprays along damp coastal roadsides in early July, and you will understand the attraction it held for the early herbalists. Its umbels of yellow flowers and smooth, thread-like leaves are elegantly soft, giving the plant a curiously foppish air beside the hairy yokels it shares its living space with. Crush the leaves in your hand and they give off a powerful aromatic odour, reminiscent of aniseed. On a hot summer's day this is enough to betray the plant's presence, for the cool tang stands out from the heavy, sweet musk of hogweed and elder like a throwback to a sharp April morning.

Fennel was probably introduced to Britain by the Romans, and it now occurs throughout the southern half of the country, on cliffs as much as on roadsides, but it tends to grow in rather localised patches. All parts of the plant are edible, from the stalks – if your teeth are strong enough – to the rather sparse bulb. (The larger fennel bulbs available in the shops belong to cultivated Florence fennel, *Foeniculum vulgare var. dulce*.) They all have a fresh, nutty flavour. But it is the thinner stalks, leaf-sprays and seeds that are the most useful.

The green parts of the plant should be cut with a sharp knife early in the summer, and some (stalks included) hung up to dry for the winter. Fennel smells stronger as it dries, and after a few weeks a good-sized bunch will be powerful enough to scent a whole room. The seeds should be gathered late in October, just before they are fully dry. Fennel leaves are popular in cooking, particularly in fish dishes. Gooseberry and fennel sauce is a classic accompaniment for mackerel (see p. 175). The dried stalks form the basis of the famous Provençal red mullet dish, *rouget flambé au fenouil*. The finely chopped green leaves are also good to add to liver, potato salad, parsnips, and even, Len Deighton recommends, apple pie.

Fennel was one of the Anglo-Saxon herbalists' nine sacred herbs, and the seeds were valued as – among other things – a remedy for wind. The digestive properties of the seeds are still recognised, and they are sometimes served at the end of Indian meals.

## Okrochka

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This exotic cold soup from the near East makes use of the cool fragrance of fennel. It is a perfect dish on a warm summer evening, and utilises some other wild summer herbs you may gather.

250 ml (10 fl oz) yoghurt  
(natural or apple)

250 ml (10 fl oz) milk

1 cup diced fresh  
cucumber

½ cup chopped pickled  
cucumber or gherkin

½ cup diced cooked  
chicken

1 handful finely chopped  
fennel leaves

Fresh summer herbs  
(e.g. mint, parsley, chives)

2 hard-boiled eggs,  
chopped

Salt and pepper to taste

- Mix the yoghurt and milk in a good-sized bowl.
- Add the fresh cucumber, pickled cucumber or gherkin, chicken and fennel together with a little of the other summer herbs.
- Season with salt and pepper and put in the fridge for at least two hours.
- Before serving, add the roughly chopped hardboiled eggs, and sprinkle the surface with a little more black pepper and fresh herbs.







## Hemlock

*Conium maculatum*



Common on waste ground and by streams. Flowers June, July, in white umbels. A tall plant, up to 2.1 m (7 ft) high, with feathery foliage and hollow, purple-spotted stems. The whole plant emits an unpleasant mousy odour when bruised. Most toxic when young and green, and the poisonous alkaloids are destroyed by drying and heat. (Opposite, top left and opposite, top right.)

## Wild Celery

*Apium graveolens*

Widespread but local in damp places near the sea, and mainly in the south and east of England. Flowers June to September. A strongly smelling plant, growing about 30–60 cm (1–2 ft) high, with shiny, yellow-green leaves, shaped much like those of garden celery, and rather sparse white umbels of flowers. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)

The powerful aroma of wild celery, or smallage, largely disappears on drying, leaving a herb which is exactly like strong celery in flavour, and ideal for soups. To make a straight cream of wild celery – much richer and tangier than garden celery soup – pick a small bunch of the leaves, dry for about three weeks (in a little-used room), then simmer for about half an hour in some chicken stock. Strain, stir in a cupful of hot milk and serve immediately. Even in the fresh, undried state, the taste is nothing like as powerful as might be expected from the smell. The stems are not of course as bitey as those of the garden variety, but I have found that a few of them, chopped, make a brisk ingredient for salads.



## Parsley

*Petroselinum crispum*

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A sturdy plant of sandy and rocky banks, similar to the familiar garden herb, but lacking its thick, feathery leaf clusters.

It is doubtful whether any of the parsley plants which can occasionally be found growing wild on rocky places near the sea are any more than escapees from gardens. The plant is almost certainly a comparatively recent introduction from the Mediterranean, and I can find no records of it being grown here before the sixteenth century. As a change from a redundant garnishing, try frying parsley for half a minute in hot butter and serving it as a vegetable with fish. It is extremely rich in vitamin C.

## Scots Lovage

*Ligusticum scoticum*

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A stocky umbellifer, 60–90 cm (2–3 ft), with bright green, leathery leaves, which grows locally on rocky sea cliffs in Scotland. It was occasionally eaten against scurvy. (Opposite)

Its cultivated cousin, *Levisticum officinale*, is naturalised from herb gardens in a few places. This domesticated lovage is a much more distinctive plant, growing over 3.5 m (11–12 ft) tall, and its uses are correspondingly wider. The hollow stems have been candied like angelica, and blanched like celery for use as a salad vegetable.

The flavour of both varieties is curious, basically resembling celery, but having quite strong yeasty overtones. Because of this lovage has been used to add body to the flavour of soups and casseroles when meat is short.

Lovage is scarce in the wild, and the best way of experiencing its flavour may be to grow *Levisticum officinale* in the herb garden – though it is a very large perennial.





## Wild Parsnip

*Pastinaca sativa*

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A native umbellifer of chalk and limestone in the southeast of England. In the poor soils of road verges and waste ground it often grows to no more than 45 cm (18 inches) in height. (Opposite, top left and opposite top right.)

The wild parsnip is a stocky, economical plant, with none of the excess and luxuriance of some of our *Umbelliferae*. Its chrome-yellow umbels could only really be confused with those of fennel, but it lacks the feathery leaves and aniseed smell. *Pastinaca sativa* is almost certainly an ancestor of our cultivated parsnips. An experiment in Cirencester in the mid nineteenth-century produced large, fleshy roots from the wild stock in ten years. No more was done than to transplant the wild parsnips into rich garden soil, and resow each season with the seeds of those specimens with the largest roots.

Cultivation of this kind was almost certainly under way in the Middle Ages, as the parsnip was valued as a sweetening ingredient for sauces, cakes and puddings. The wild roots are just about edible after the first frosts but they are thin and wiry and of more historical than culinary interest.

## Hogweed, Cow Parsnip

*Heracleum sphondylium*

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Widespread and abundant in hedges and grassy places. Flowers June to December. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)

Cooked like asparagus, the young shoots are marvellously fleshy.



## Lungwort

*Pulmonaria officinalis*

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An intriguing flower, somewhat similar to the closely related comfrey, except that its leaves are covered with a rash of white spots.

Lungwort is a frequent escapee from gardens, where it used to be grown as a medicine 'gainst the infirmities and ulcers of the lungs'. Gerard also recommends it as a boiled vegetable.





## Common Comfrey

*Symphytum officinale*

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Widespread and common in ditches and by riverbanks throughout the British Isles. A bushy, hairy perennial, growing up to 120 cm (4 ft) high, with dark green spear-shaped leaves. Flowers June to October, white, cream, mauve or pink bells in clusters.

Comfrey is an increasingly common plant of damp places, especially by running water. In this sort of habitat its broad, spear-shaped leaves are unmistakable, even when the plant is not in bloom. They are dull and hairy underneath, a fine, dark, almost glossy green above, and with slightly indented reticulations, as if the leaves had been pressed against a mould.

It is the leaves which are now used in cookery. Don't worry about their furry texture; this disappears completely during cooking. Nor is there much need to be particular about the age of the leaves you use, for in my experience the older ones (provided of course they have not started to wither) have more flavour than the younger. One way of using them is to boil them like spinach, with plenty of seasoning. There is no need to add butter, as the leaves themselves are fairly glutinous. The young leaf spears, picked in March when they are no more than a couple of centimetres tall, make excellent salads, not unlike sliced cucumber.

Comfrey (from the Latin *confervere*, to grow together) was the medieval herbalists' favourite bone-setter. The root was lifted in the spring, grated up and used as plaster is today. In a short while the mash would set as solid as a hard wood. In fact the whole plant was one of those 'wonder herbs' that was used for every sort of knitting operation from drawing splinters to healing ruptures. Gerard's recommendation was even more eclectic:

'The slimie substance of the roote made in a posset of ale, and given to drinke against the paine in the backe, gotten by any violent motion, as wrestling, or over much use of women, doth in fower or five daies perfectly cure the same.'



## Schwarzwurz

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The best recipe for comfrey leaves are these Teutonic fritters. The crisp golden batter contrasts delightfully with the mild, glutinous leaves. They make an excellent companion to fried fish, which echo the shape of the leaves.

Comfrey leaves,  
as many as required  
1 egg  
50 g (2 oz) plain flour  
250 ml (½ pint) milk  
or water  
½ tsp sea salt  
Butter or oil for frying

- Leave the stalks on the comfrey leaves, wash, dry, and dip into a thin batter made from the egg, flour, milk or water and salt.
- Fry the battered leaf in oil for no more than two minutes.
- For a more succulent result stick two or three similarly-sized leaves together before battering.

## Borage

*Borago officinalis*

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Quite common as an escape on waysides and waste places. A loosely bushy annual, 30–60 cm (1–2 ft) with conspicuously hairy stems, leaves and sepals. Flowers bright blue, with reflexed petals and prominent purple stamens, May to September.

Borage once had a great reputation as a sort of herbal pep-pill. It was renowned as an aphrodisiac and as a general dispeller of melancholy and depression. John Evelyn clearly understood the type of person who would perennially be in need of such aids when he wrote that 'the sprigs ... are of known virtue to revive the hypochondriac and cheer the hard student'.

Whatever its medicinal qualities, the young leaves and bright blue, star-like flowers make a refreshing and fragrant addition to claret cups and other summer drinks, particularly in combination with woodruff. The star-shaped petals look appealing floated out on top of the drink – or frozen inside ice cubes. In more leisurely days, Richard Jefferies noted in *Nature Near London* (1881), borage leaves used 'to float in the claret cup ladled out to thirsty travellers at the London railway stations'.









## Oysterplant

*Mertensia maritima*

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A hairless perennial of shingle beaches, with reddish trailing stems and fleshy, blue-green leaves. Flowers in clusters, pink turning blue, June to August.

This is a rare plant that grows on a few stretches of coastal shingle in Scotland, in prostrate mats. The fleshy leaves have been eaten both raw and cooked, and taste like oysters.



## Ground-ivy

*Glechoma hederacea*

Common in woods, hedges, cultivated ground. A low, creeping perennial, often carpeting the ground. Leaves kidney-shaped, long-stalked, softly hairy. Flowers blue, in whorls at the base of the leaves, March to June.

The dried leaves of ground-ivy make one of the more agreeable herbal teas, cooling and with a sharp, slight fragrance. Before hops became widely accepted in the seventeenth century, ground-ivy – known then as alehoof – was one of the chief agents for flavouring and clarifying ale. In the seventeenth century, Nicholas Culpeper wrote of it:

'It is good to run up with new drink, for it will clarify it in a night, that it will be fitter to be dranke the next morning; or if any drinke be thick with removing or any other accident, it will do the like in a few hours.'

## Dead-nettles

The young shoots and leaves of these common and familiar weeds can be added to salads, stir-fried as a green vegetable (either by themselves or in company with other spring greens), or washed and cooked with no additional water but with a knob of butter, salt and pepper and some chopped spring onions, for about ten minutes. Finish with a dash of lemon juice or a sprinkling of nutmeg.

## Yellow Archangel

*Lamiastrum galeobdolon*

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Widespread and locally common in old woodland and shady hedgerows in England and Wales. Flowers May to June. (Opposite, top left and overleaf.)

## White Dead-nettle

*Lamium album*

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Widespread and common in hedgebanks, waste places and gardens. Rare and local in the north and west of Scotland, and in the west of Ireland. Flowers March to November. (Opposite, bottom right.)

## Red Dead-nettle

*Lamium purpureum*

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Widespread and abundant in cultivated ground throughout the British Isles. Flowers throughout the year in mild conditions. (Opposite, top right.)

## Henbit Dead-nettle

*Lamium amplexicaule*

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Locally common in cultivated ground, commonest in the east of Britain. Flowers March to October. (Opposite, bottom left.)









## Balm

*Melissa officinalis*

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Naturalised in hedgebanks and shady places in southern England. A medium hairy perennial with yellow-green pointed leaves. Flowers white or pale yellow in leafy whorls, July to September.

A Mediterranean herb, introduced and widely naturalised in waste places and near gardens in the south of England. Balm is an undistinguished-looking plant like a bushy mint, yet it has always been popular in herb gardens. Bees adore the flowers, and it was reputed that they would never leave a garden that had a clump of balm growing. While a beehive was still a standard fixture in gardens, so was a 'bee-balm'. Balm is still grown for its strongly lemon-scented leaves, which make a refreshing tea. The leaves can also be added to wine-cups, or they can act as a substitute for lemons in stuffings and salads, and can be used to give a tang to apple jelly.

### Lemon-balm tea

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Make an infusion of fresh leaves and stalks, strain and drink as it is. Or add ice to make a cooler for hot days. Fresh or dried leaves can also be added to light Indian or China teas for extra flavour and for their carminative effects.





## Wild Marjoram, Oregano

*Origanum vulgare*

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Widespread and locally common in grassy places on chalk and limestone. Rare in Scotland. A slender herb, growing up to 1 m (3 ft) high, with downy stems extensively branched near the top of the plant. The leaves are oval and usually untoothed, and the flowers a pale, pinkish purple, in bunches at the head of the plant. Flowers July to October.

The marjoram growing wild in Britain is also known as the herb oregano. It is spicier than sweet marjoram, *Origanum majorana* (the herb marjoram, a more southern species). Oregano is one of the elemental flavours of Mediterranean cooking. It belongs with the pervasive mixture of tomato and garlic and olive oil and adds a warm, earthy fragrance that seems to capture the essence of the hot south. In Britain, marjoram never achieves quite the rough fragrance it does in sunnier parts. However, gathered in summer it is perfect for drying, and used in winter it recalls something of the spirit of warmer months.

When you find marjoram growing wild on a dry heath or chalky roadside bank, its flimsy, slightly grey-tinged leaves look very appetising, and used raw they do indeed make a pleasantly pungent addition to salads. For use as a herb, pick some sprigs of the plant, flowers and all, whilst it is in full bloom, and later strip off the leaves and blossoms from the rather wiry stalk. But be on the watch for discoloured or 'burnt' leaves. The plant is prone to moulds and rusts, and infected leaves, though harmless, are usually musty to taste. Oregano is above all a meat herb. It gives a fine savour to stews and casseroles, to spaghetti sauces and shepherd's pie, even to grilled steaks, if they are first rubbed with the herb.

But wild marjoram becomes sweeter as it dries, and can then be used in a wider range of dishes. In the south of England tea made from marjoram leaves used to be popular, and large quantities were gathered and hung up to dry. Marjoram has also been used for medicinal purposes since ancient times, either as an infusion or in oil.

## Marjoram sugar

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Add chopped flowers, buds and a few young leaves to a jar of caster sugar, and stand in the sun for a day. The scent will subtly transfer to the sugar, which can then be used for sprinkling on cake, fruit and desserts.

## Olives oregano

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When olives are steeped in a marinade of oil flavoured with the freshly picked plant, they acquire something of the aroma of the herb. To 500 g (1 lb) of pricked olives in a jar, add one cup of olive oil, one teaspoon of thyme, one teaspoon of crushed peppercorns and three teaspoons of chopped wild marjoram. Close the jar, shake well and leave in a refrigerator for at least two days. Olives treated like this make a perfect centrepiece for a lunch for the season when marjoram is in flower. Serve them with a light red wine and cheese.

## Herb scones

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These unusual scones should be served with roast meat or vegetables.

50 g (2 oz) butter  
100 g (4 oz) salted flour  
1 heaped tsp chopped  
marjoram

- Rub the butter into the flour until it resembles breadcrumbs.
- Add the marjoram, and enough cold water to make a stiff dough. Mix well but lightly with a knife, and then shape into thin cakes with your hands.
- Put them on a greased tray in the oven for 12–15 minutes (longer if you are cooking the meat slowly).







## Wild Thyme

*Thymus* species

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Widespread and often common in grassy places, especially on chalk and limestone, and on sandy heaths. A prostrate, creeping plant, with rather woody stems and runners, 5–10 cm (2–4 inches). Leaves very small, oval, and ranged in many opposing pairs along the stalks. The flowers are reddish purple in roundish bunches at the ends of the stalks, June to August.

Wild thyme is one of the most pleasantly scented of herbs. But be under no illusion: your nostrils are not going to be filled with that heady aroma as you stride over the springy turf with your basket. Wild thyme has neither the bushy forthrightness nor the pungency of cultivated thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) or of the species that grow so conspicuously in the Mediterranean. It is a subtle, skulking plant, often growing entirely below grass level. Finding it is a hands-and-knees job, a rummage through the miniature downland flora, the milkworts and violets, for a sprig of toy, oval leaves that yield that clovy smell between the fingers. Then, tracing the runners back, following their meanderings through the dry lower stems of the grasses back to the woody root.

For a short while, when each plant is in flower, picking is a simpler exercise – though less rewarding I think than the fingertip ferreting for the spring and autumn shoots. The flower-heads are large compared to the size of the plant and, like marjoram, conspicuous for their attendant insects. Wild thyme is best picked when in full bloom, so that the honey-scented flowers can be used as well as the leaves.

If you like you can strip the leaves and flowers off the stalk before using. But as wild thyme is considerably milder than the garden variety you can afford to use large sprigs of it liberally – and indeed to try it out in unconventional combinations. The great virtue of wild thyme is precisely its versatility.

Try it as a tea, or chopped finely and beaten into butter. Add it to omelettes and to stuffings for roast chicken. But think of it, too, as a convenient way of perking up picnic or outdoor food. A few sprigs can be added to pots of cottage cheese, tucked inside sandwiches, thrown into almost any casserole and wrapped up with roast joints in foil. In Scandinavia, steeped in aquavit, it makes one of the favourite varieties of schnapps.

### Thyme soup

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Patience Gray has a simple but comforting Catalan shepherd's recipe in her classic book *Honey From a Weed*. Soak several slices of dry white bread in olive oil. Infuse a bunch of dried wild thyme in boiling water for five minutes, then pour this over the oily bread and serve.

# Water Mint

*Mentha aquatica*

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Widespread and common by the edges of streams, in damp meadows and woods, throughout the British Isles. A rough, hairy mint, often growing in quite sizeable clumps up to 60 cm (2 ft) high. The leaves are frequently tinged with purple, and grow in opposed pairs. Bluish-lilac flowers chiefly in a round bushy head at the top of the plant, July to September.

Water mint can be used exactly as if it were a garden mint. Try adding mint to cooked egg and cheese dishes, as well as to peas and potatoes. But if you should find the taste of water mint a little too bitter, even in a well-sugared mint sauce, try the recipe for Indian mint chutney, in which the wild mint's sharper qualities can be a positive virtue. Alternatively, add a few sprigs to a pot of China tea, or make a simple mint tea by steeping the leaves in hot (not boiling) water for about five minutes.

## Mint chutney

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- |                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 50 g (2 oz) mint leaves           | • Wash and dry the mint, and grind (or liquidise)   |
| 2 tbs vinegar                     | to a thick paste with the vinegar.  |
| 100 g (4 oz) tamarind,<br>chopped | • Add the tamarind, chillies, onion, garlic and<br>salt to the mint paste and mix thoroughly. |
| 50 g (2 oz) green<br>chillies     | • Bottle and store for a few days before using.   |
| 1 onion                           |   |
| 1 clove of garlic                 |   |
| 1 dsp salt                        |   |

There are over a dozen varieties of mint growing either wild or naturalised in Britain. All can be used more or less like water mint, though the quality of their flavours varies. The following are the most frequently found.



## Corn Mint

*Mentha arvensis*

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Widespread and frequent in arable land, heaths, damp woodland rides. A much-maligned plant whose fragrance has been described as 'acid' by one writer, like 'wet mouldy gorgonzola' by Geoffrey Grigson, but as 'a strong fulsome mixed smell of mellow apples and gingerbread' by the eighteenth-century mint expert William Sole. You must judge for yourself. (Opposite, top left.)

## Spear Mint

*Mentha spicata*

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The mint usually grown in gardens, and frequently found naturalised near houses. (Opposite, bottom right.)

## Apple-mint

*Mentha villosa*

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Another garden escapee. Apple-scented, and good in summer drinks.

## Whorled Mint

*Mentha verticillata*

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Widespread and not uncommon in damp places. Many members of the mint family hybridise readily with each other, and this species is a cross between our two commonest mints, water mint and corn mint.

## Peppermint

*Mentha piperita*

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This mint occurs only rarely in the wild, yet it is a natural hybrid between spear mint and water mint. It was not discovered in this country until the late seventeenth century. But why peppermint? It has a sharp taste, certainly, but nothing like the fieriness of pepper. The herb is now extensively cultivated for its aromatic oil, which is used in toothpastes, sweets and indigestion remedies. (Opposite, top right and opposite, bottom left.)



## Greater Plantain

*Plantago major*

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Greater plantain has long, pale green flower-heads, 15–45 cm (6–18 inches) high, perfectly described by their alternative name of 'rat's-tails'.

Plantain is one of those plants that positively thrive on rough treatment. The more you walk on it or mow it the better it does. The North American Indians went as far as to call it 'Englishman's foot', for wherever the white man walked and worked, plantain followed. Its rosettes of ribbed oval leaves are abundant on lawns and footpaths. The young leaves have been used as a salad herb, but I find them too tough and bitter when raw, and would advise them to be well cooked as a spinach.



## Brooklime

*Veronica beccabunga*

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Widespread and common by the edges of streams and in wet places.  
Flowers May to September.

A quite widely used salad plant in northern Europe, rather bitter. The American species was once praised by *Scientific American* as 'a salad plant equal to the water-cress. Delightful in flavour, healthful and anti-scorbutic.'







## Lady's Bedstraw

*Galium verum*

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Widespread on dry grassland, especially chalk and limestone near the sea. A hairy perennial, 10–120 cm (4–48 inches) high, with narrow pointed leaves and dense clusters of yellow flowers.

Lady's bedstraw is a feathery, insubstantial plant, whose myriads of tiny yellow flowers smell of honey when cool and fresh. But when the plant is dried it develops the characteristic hay-like smell of coumarin (like woodruff, also a member of the bedstraw family). This breaks down to yield a powerful anti-coagulant, dicoumarol, and there is always a small quantity of this in picked specimens of the plant. Yet lady's bedstraw also contains some chemical which overrides this, as it is of proven value as a styptic. It was once also used as a kind of vegetable rennet, for curdling milk into junkets and cheese. I have never found full instructions for this old practice, and have not yet succeeded in making more than a thin skin of rather bitter junket with it.





## Goosegrass, Cleavers

*Galium aparine*

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Widespread and abundant in hedges, woods and cultivated ground. A straggling annual, 50–180 cm (1–6 ft), with square stems and whorls of 6–8 leaves, covered in all parts with tiny turned-down prickles. Flowers inconspicuous, white, May to June.

A great children's plant, which clings mercilessly to trousers and coats and any rough surface which brushes against it. If you look at a section of the stalk of leaf under a microscope you will see that the plant's sticking power is due to the hook-like bristles which cover every part of it. Seen like this, they look positively dangerous, and certainly not fit to eat. But look at the hooks again after the plant has been plunged into boiling water for a few seconds, and you will see that they have 'melted' and quite lost their forbidding sharpness.

Boiled as a spinach before the hard round seeds appear, goosegrass makes tolerable if stringy eating, and can, moreover, be picked through winter when few other green plants are to be found. In the seventeenth century John Evelyn recommended the young shoots in spring soups and puddings. Few meagre weeds can have had their various parts put to so many ingenious uses. The seeds have been roasted and used as a coffee. In the green state they were used to adorn the tops of lacemakers' pins (the young seeds were pushed onto the pins to make a sort of padded head). And some books report that the prickly stems and leaves were used to strain hair out of milk.

## Woodruff

*Galium odoratum*

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Widespread and often abundant in ancient woods and hedgebanks, especially beech, and on chalk and limestone. Grows in clusters to about 30 cm (1 ft) high, with whorls of six to nine leaves at intervals up the smooth stems. Flowers small, white and four-petalled, in loose heads, April to June.

In the late spring, the edges of beech woods are often thickly carpeted with the young shoots of woodruff, immaculate in their tiny marble-white flowers and brisk green ruffs. When they are green the plants are almost odourless; but allow them to dry and they quickly develop the cool, fresh smell of new-mown hay. The plant was once popular for scenting dried linen and laying in beds.

This smell, which you will recognise if you have dried meadowsweet or melilot, is due to a chemical called coumarin (see lady's bedstraw, p. 272). The scent readily transfers to liquids, and makes dried woodruff an ideal herb to add to summer wine cups. A bottle of pure apple juice in which a sprig has been allowed to steep for a week becomes positively ambrosial.

## Maibowle

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The classic woodruff recipe is for *Maibowle* or *Maiwein*, traditionally drunk in Germany on May Day. Steep a bunch of dried woodruff in a jug of Moselle wine. Add a couple of tablespoons of sugar dissolved in water. Chill, and serve with thinly sliced orange.



## Common Cornsalad, Lamb's-lettuce

*Valerianella locusta*

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Quite common in arable ground, on banks and walls. A slender annual, 5–20 cm (2–8 inches). Flowers tiny, lilac, in flat-topped clusters, April to August.

A diminutive and rather bland plant that is nevertheless a useful addition to salads, especially as it stays in leaf for most of the winter. Lamb's lettuce and its cultivated cousins are popular in France, where they are known as *mache* and *salade de prêtre*. The leaves are best served with a sharp dressing to bring out their flavour and texture.



## Red Valerian

*Centranthus ruber*

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Local on walls, old buildings, wasteland and cliffs. A blue-green, hairless perennial, 30–80 cm (1–3 ft), with small red, pink or white flowers in branched clusters, May to September.

In France and Italy the very young leaves of this plant are sometimes boiled with butter as greens, or eaten raw in salads – though they are rather bitter used this way. Red valerian was introduced to Britain from southern Europe in the sixteenth century, and was a great favourite of Gerard's, though he ascribed no practical uses to the plant. Its red flowers now adorn many stony and rocky places in the southwest.





## Burdock

*Arctium minus*

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Widespread and common throughout the British Isles, at the edges of woods, and on roadsides and waste ground. A stiff, bushy plant, up to 90 cm (3 ft) high, conspicuous early in the year for its large, floppy, heart-shaped leaves, and later for its stout branching stems. Flowers July to September. The flower-heads are egg-shaped and thistle-like, and turn at the fruiting stage into the well-known prickly burs.

Burdock is sometimes mistaken for rhubarb. Often there is nothing to be seen of the plant except its huge leaves draped over the ground. The parts to pick are the young leaf stems which begin to sprout round about May (after September they are too tough and stringy). The stems should be cut into 5 cm (2 inch) lengths and the hard outer peel stripped off. This will leave you with a moist core about the thickness of a pipe-cleaner. This can be chopped and used raw in salads, boiled and served with butter like asparagus, or added to meat soups. It has a flavour slightly reminiscent of new potatoes. Burdock roots are used quite extensively in Japanese cooking. They are sliced thinly and braised with soy sauce, or wrapped in their own leaves and silver foil and roasted whole. If tempted to try this yourself, remember that the law requires you to obtain the landowner's permission before digging up any wild plant by the root.



## Marsh Thistle

*Cirsium palustre*

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A tall, common thistle, up to 2 m (6 ft), found in grassy places and woods, especially on wet ground. (Opposite, top left and opposite, top right.)

The young shoots have been used like burdock in some European countries. The prickles and the tough outer peel are removed, and the stalks then used in salads or boiled.

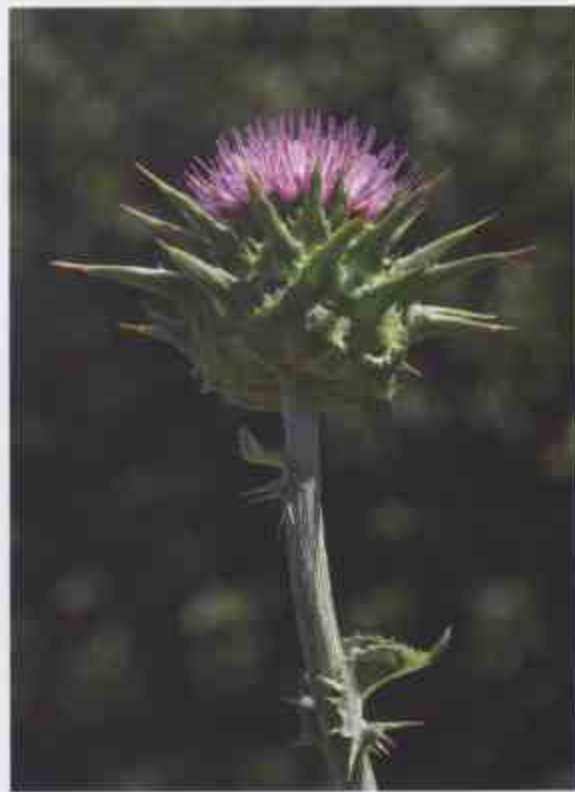
## Milk Thistle

*Silybum marianum*

---

Scattered and rare in the British Isles. It is liable to spring up in any waste place, but prefers areas near the sea. A distinctive plant, growing up to 150 cm (5 ft) high. Leaves spiny, dark green, intricately veined in white. Flowers purple, June to August; flower bracts end in yellow spines. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)

Centuries ago this handsome thistle was introduced into western European gardens from the Mediterranean, for use as a medicinal herb. Almost all parts of the plant were eaten. The leaves were trimmed of prickles and boiled. The stems were peeled, soaked in water to remove the bitterness and then stewed like rhubarb. Even the spiny bracts that surround the broad flower-head were eaten like globe artichokes.





## Hardhead, Common Knapweed

*Centaurea nigra*

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A common wayside plant, up to 1 m (3 ft), with feathery purple petals.

The petals may be used in salads, and give a splash of unusual colour if scattered over a green-leaf base.



## Chicory

*Cichorium intybus*

Widespread throughout England and Wales, but only locally common, usually in grassy and waste places on chalk. An untidy perennial with grooved stems, 30–120 cm (1–4 ft). Flowers pale blue, June to September.

This is the 'succory' of the old herbalists, a tall, distinguished plant with startling cornflower-blue blossoms. Chicory is probably not a native of the British Isles, but it still grows in quite a wide range of grassy habitats, especially on chalk and limestone. The roots are boiled and eaten in the Middle East, and it is from the Arabic *chicouryeh* that the English name for the plant is derived. Roast and ground, the roots make an acceptable (though slightly bitter) substitute for, or addition to, coffee, and have been extensively cultivated for this purpose. Chicory was used on a wide scale during the Second World War when coffee supplies were cut off. The leaves of chicory can be used as a salad vegetable in summer, and the following five members of the daisy family can all be used similarly.



## Nipplewort

*Lapsana communis*

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Widespread and common on shady banks, roadsides, etc. Flowers from June to September. (Opposite, top left.)

## Cat's-ear

*Hypochaeris radicata*

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Common in dry pastures, open woods and other grassy places. Flowers May to September, but the leaves continue to grow through much of the winter. (Opposite, top right.)

## Rough Hawkbit

*Leontodon hispidus*

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Common in meadows, roadside verges and dry, grassy places. Flowers May to September. (Opposite, bottom left.)

## Perennial Sow-thistle

*Sonchus arvensis*

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Widespread and common throughout the British Isles, on road verges and cultivated ground. Flowers July to October. (Opposite, bottom right.)



## Goat's-beard

*Tragopogon pratensis*

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Widespread and common in dry, grassy places. Flowers June to September. (Opposite, top left and opposite, top right.)

## Salsify

*Tragopogon porrifolius*

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Salsify still grows wild in a few places, chiefly near estuaries in the south-east of England. It is a tall, straight plant, up to 1 m (3 ft), with purplish dandelion-like flowers. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)

Do not pick wild specimens whilst the plant is still so uncommon, but it ought to be purchased more often from the few shops which stock the cultivated variety. The long white roots are first carefully peeled, and then boiled or steamed with butter and lemon juice. The flavour is sufficiently individual for the roots to be served as a dish on their own.





# Dandelion

*Taraxacum* species

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Widespread and abundant in open and grassy places throughout British Isles. Leaves grow from base of plant and are roughly toothed. The whole plant exudes a milky juice when cut. Flowers February to November, but especially April and May. Largish golden-yellow flowers made up of numerous fine petals, on hollow stems up to 30 cm (1 ft) tall.

The dandelion is one of the most profuse of British weeds, and in late spring is liable to cover almost any grassy place with its blazing yellow flowers. Its leaves and consequently its roots can be found at almost any time of the year except the very coldest, which is welcome, given the wide range of food uses to which the plant can be put. But note the French name (*pissenlit*), and some of the English folk names (such as 'pissabed'), which should warn you that the plant has a reputation as a diuretic.

One use of the long white roots is to make a coffee substitute, which is remarkably like real coffee but is caffeine-free. Dig up the roots (from your own garden, or with the landowner's permission) in the autumn, when they are at their fattest and most mellow, and scrub well (though do not peel). Dry them thoroughly, preferably in the sun, and then roast in an oven until they are brittle. Grind them fairly coarsely and use as ordinary coffee.

Dandelion is especially useful as a salad plant, since the leaves can be gathered at almost any time of the year. Only after prolonged frost or snow is it impossible to find any. Choose the youngest leaves and strip them from the plant by hand. The root is quite strong enough to be unaffected by this sort of picking. If you have dandelions growing in your garden, try manuring them and covering the lower parts of the leaves with earth or a cardboard tube to blanch them like chicory. They did this in medieval gardens and produced gigantic plants as a result.

When you have sufficient leaves, trim off any excess stalk, and wash well. The roughly chopped leaves can be made into a good salad simply by dressing with olive oil, lemon juice and a trace of garlic. They can also be served in sandwiches with a dash of Worcester sauce, or tossed in fried bacon as *pissenlit aux lardons*.

The nineteenth-century French chef Marcel Boulestin recommended a salad made from equal quantities of dandelion 'hearts' (unopened flower-buds plus young surrounding leaves) and chopped beetroot.

## Dandelion Salad

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This is an elaborate recipe from Henri Toulouse-Lautrec's eccentric cookbook, *The Art of Cuisine* (c. 1890). 'In the fields at the end of January or February, after a thaw, pick some dandelions which are beginning to grow – whose hearts already show signs of yellow.

'Wash them and dry them carefully in a cloth. Into a salad bowl put some fine olive oil or fresh walnut oil, let the salt dissolve in it, add some wine vinegar, pepper, and a small spoonful of mustard. Mix it well; crush three or four hard-boiled eggs, finely chopped, and proceed so that the whole mixture is sufficiently seasoned to taste.

'Throw in the dandelions and work them for a fairly long time into the sauce. When you are just about to serve, add and toss in a plateful of cubes of bacon, slightly browned and well crisped in butter, and small pieces of red herring.'

January or February are really too early for the British climate, but by March you can certainly pick new leaves, together with the yellowing hearts, by using a penknife and cutting deep into the plant, almost to the top of the root. You could omit the crushed eggs, which to my mind would make too heavy a sauce and overpower the thin leaves. But fried bacon cubes (and maybe some croutons as well) are perfect additions, the bitterness of the dandelion contrasting with the bacon's fattiness. The mixture of oil and bacon fat which remains from the frying is the best base for the dressing too – mixed, as Lautrec suggests, with wine vinegar, pepper and a smidgeon of mustard.

## Dandelion Root, Japanese style

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Chop the scrubbed roots into thin rings and sauté these in vegetable oil, using about one tablespoonful of oil to one cup of chopped roots. Then add a small amount of water, a little salt, and cover the pan. Stew until the roots are soft and most of the moisture and added water have evaporated. Finally add a dash of soy sauce.





# Tansy

*Tanacetum vulgare*

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**Widespread in grassy and rough ground throughout Europe. Perennial, almost hairless, up to 1.2 m (4 ft) high, with toothed pinnate leaves and yellow, button-like flowers in large clusters from July to October.**

There was a time when tansy was one of the most widely grown garden herbs. It was a key item in the housewife's armoury of medicines, and had an extraordinarily wide range of uses in the kitchen. All of which goes to show how much our tastes have changed over the last few centuries, for tansy is an unusually off-putting plant. It smells like a strong chest ointment and has a hot, bitter taste. Used in excess it is more than unpleasant, and can be a dangerous irritant to the stomach.

Nevertheless, at Easter the young leaves were traditionally served with fried eggs and used to flavour puddings made from milk, flour and eggs. This may have been to symbolise the bitter herbs eaten by the Jews at Passover, though one sixteenth-century writer explained that it was to counteract the effects 'engendered of Fish in the Lent season'. He may have been on to something, as the quality of fish at that time no doubt encouraged the development of parasitic worms, and oil of tansy is quite effective as a vermifuge.

Earlier still, the juice was extracted from the chopped leaves and used to flavour omelettes. This gave the name tansye in the fifteenth century as a generic term for any herb-flavoured omelette. And there was a delightful medieval bubble-and-squeak, made from a fry-up of tansy leaves, green corn and violets, and served with orange and sugar.

Try the taste of tansy for yourself. Whatever you think of its flavour it is an attractive herb, with its clusters of golden, button-shaped flowers and ferny leaves.



## Wormwood

*Artemisia absinthium*

 POISONOUS

Frequent on rough ground, waste places and waysides in England and Wales. A strongly scented perennial, up to 1 m (3 ft), with yellowish flower-heads from July to August.

A bitter oil extracted from the flower-heads of this attractive silky-grey plant is the key ingredient of absinthe, that most potent of alcoholic drinks. The flowers have also been used in mainland Europe to counteract the greasiness of goose and duck dishes. Used in small quantities the herb has beneficial, tonic properties. But in excess it can be damaging to the heart. It also contains an anthelmintic called santonin, which is a hallucinogen if taken in overdose. Objects first appear blue and then change to yellow.



## Mugwort

*Artemisia vulgaris*

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Common throughout lowland Britain, on waste ground and roadsides. A many-branched perennial, up to 1.5 m (5 ft). The flower-heads are reddish-brown and occur in clusters.

A common native relative of wormwood, whose bitter leaves have been used to flavour beer, and dried, as in tea.





## Yarrow

*Achillea millefolium*

A sturdy, ferny perennial, 10–100 cm (4–40 inches) that grows in abundance in grassy places. Flowers consist of creamy-white disc florets and pink ray florets in flat-topped clusters, sometimes flowering right up to Christmas.

The Anglo-Saxons regarded yarrow as a powerful herb, providing protection against bad luck and illness. It also had a great reputation amongst herbalists as an astringent for wounds, although it was also believed to cause nosebleeds if one of the feathery leaves went up the nose. Used in small quantities it can make a cool if rather bitter addition to salads. It can also be used as a cooked vegetable by removing the feathery leaves from the tough stems, boiling for five minutes, straining off the water, and then simmering in butter.





## Common Chamomile

*Chamaemelum nobile*

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**Hairy, spreading perennial of grassy and heathy places. Flowers June to September.**

Common chamomile is not common at all; in fact it is a rather rare plant largely confined to the south of England. It has a daisy-like flower and feathery leaves, but being a member of the huge and complex *Asteraceae* (*Compositae*) family this is scarcely enough to identify it. It can be told from the very similar scentless mayweed (*Tripleurospermum inodorum*) and corn chamomile (*Anthemis arvensis*) by an absence of down beneath its leaves. But its most conspicuous characteristic is its sweet apple scent, for which it was once much valued in rockeries, and even planted on lawns instead of grass. Indeed, the name is derived from an ancient Greek word meaning 'ground apple'.

Chamomile is still cultivated on a small scale for its flower-heads, which make a fine herbal tea. The heads are gathered when the petals just begin to turn down, and are used either fresh or dried. To dry the flowers, pick them carefully (using scissors) and spread on paper. Wait until the heads are papery and then store in a screw-top jar until needed.



## Oxeye Daisy

*Leucanthemum vulgare*

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Widespread throughout the summer in grassy places, especially on rich soils. Erect stems, up to 75 cm (2-3 ft). One flower to each stem, each with a ring of white florets and a central yellow button.

John Evelyn reported that the roots of this, our commonest large daisy, were eaten as a salad vegetable in Spain.



## Lords-and-ladies, Arum Lily

☠ POISONOUS

*Arum maculatum*

A plant most country children are wisely taught to beware of. It grows abundantly in the shade of hedgerows and woods, like so many painted china ornaments. It is a plant which appears in several deceptively attractive disguises. The glossy, arrow-shaped leaves are amongst the very first foliage to appear in late winter. They are followed by a paler green cowl, which encloses the club-shaped flower. In late summer the hood withers and the flower produces a spike of shiny orange berries.

All stages and parts of the plant produce in the raw state an acrid, burning juice, which is a serious irritant both internally and externally. The root also contains this poisonous element, yet if it is well baked it is completely harmless. The cooked and ground roots were once in demand in this country under the name Portland sago, since the trade was centred round the Isle of Portland. The powder was used like salep or as a substitute for arrowroot.



# Common Reed

*Phragmites australis*

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**This is the common reed which so readily forms dense beds in still, shallow water. A very tall perennial, up to 3,5 m (11-12 ft).**

When the stems of this familiar waterside plant are punctured or broken while still green they slowly exude a sugary substance, which eventually hardens into a gum. The North American Indians used to collect this and break it into balls which they ate as sweets. Another way of preparing a sweet from the plant was to cut the reeds when still green, dry them, grind them and sift out the flour. This contains so much sugar that when it is placed near a fire it swells, browns, and can be eaten like toasted marsh-mallow.









## Spiked Star-of-Bethlehem, Bath Asparagus

*Ornithogalum pyrenaicum*

Very local and restricted. A hairless perennial, up to 80 cm (2-3 ft), with greyish linear leaves and tall spikes of flowers which are pale yellow on the inside and greenish-white on the outside, May to July.

An exquisite member of the lily family whose tall spikes of flowers are a distinctive feature of the limestone country around Bath and in the Avon valley in May and June, hence the name 'Bath asparagus'. Its young unopened flower-spikes were gathered wild from hedgebanks, green lanes and ancient woodland, and were sold in the local markets. It was cooked exactly like its relative, the true asparagus. In some areas, especially around Bradford-on-Avon, it can be as abundant as bluebells. But there is a doubt as to whether it is a native plant, and some botanical historians have speculated that its frequency in the Bath area may be the result of deliberate Roman introduction. Gathering for commercial sale is now illegal, but it's good that the custom of picking the plant for the table still persists in the area.

## Ramsons, Wild Garlic

*Allium ursinum*

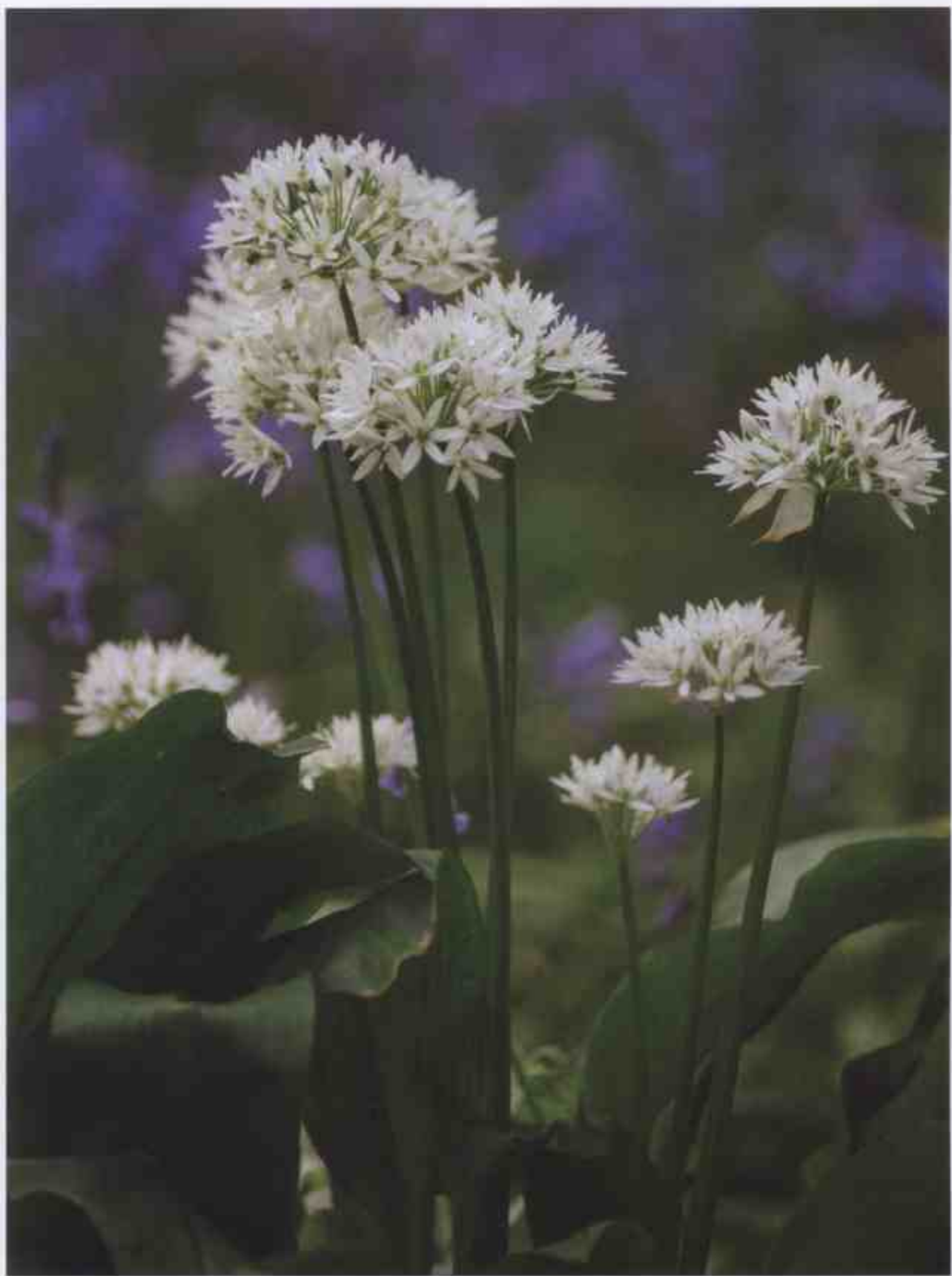
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Widespread and locally abundant in damp woods and hedgebanks throughout most of Europe. A bulbous perennial, up to 50 cm (20 inches). Leaves, broad and spear-like, often carpeting large areas. Flowers white, star-like, in a rounded umbel, April to June.

Large colonies of ramsons can often be smelt from some distance away, and garlic woods sometimes figured as landmarks in old land charters. But the taste of the leaf is milder than you might expect, and it makes an excellent substitute for garlic or spring onion in salads. Oliver Rackham recommends the leaves added to peanut butter sandwiches.

For use in salads or sauces simply cut the leaves crosswise. Also try the leaves chopped in sour cream or mayonnaise. Or take advantage of their size and cut them into long, thin strips to lay crisscross over sliced tomatoes. They have an affinity with tomatoes, and one Italian chef in the Chilterns (who also makes flavoured olive oil by soaking ramsons leaves in it) sometimes adds them to tomato sauces instead of basil.

Several other species of the garlic and onion family can be used in the same way as ramsons, or as a coarse chives. These include three-cornered garlic (*Allium triquetrum*) quite commonly naturalised in the southwest, and wild onion or crow garlic (*Allium vineale*) common in arable fields and waysides.









## Sand Leek

*Allium scorodoprasum*

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This close relative of garlic – sometimes called ‘rocambole’ – grows very locally in hedgerbanks and rough grass in northern England and southern Scotland. (Opposite, top left and opposite, top right.)

The plant has occasionally been taken into cultivation, or gathered in the wild state, and the bulbs and stems used in the same way as garlic.

## Chives

*Allium schoenoprasum*

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Chives is occasionally found in Britain as a naturalised escapee, mainly on limestone cliffs near fresh water. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)

It has long been cultivated as a herb, being especially prized by those who like the characteristic flavour of onions, but only in moderation. Its mildness and almost complete absence of a bulb have earned chives the name of ‘infant onion’. It is a highly adaptable herb, going well with cream cheese, potatoes, cucumber, salads and omelettes.





## Asparagus

*Asparagus officinalis*

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A branched perennial reaching to 2 m (6 ft), with short, needle-like tufts of leaves, bell-shaped greenish-white flowers, May to August, and red berries from April to June.

There are two varieties of asparagus growing wild in Britain: wild asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis* ssp. *prostratus*), the prostrate, native subspecies; and garden asparagus (*A. o.* ssp. *officinalis*) an introduced variety that is naturalised in the wild and may appear on roadsides and waste ground almost anywhere.

Wild asparagus is particularly uncommon, now restricted to a few coastal localities in the southwest, and neither type grows as sumptuously as cultivated specimens, so picking is not recommended. The part of both plants which is eaten is the fat shoot, or 'spear', which grows from the rootstock in early summer.



## Early-purple Orchid

*Orchis mascula*

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**Widespread but local in woods, scrub and grassland. An erect perennial, 10–40 cm (4–16 inches). Leaves narrow, oblong and usually blotched purplish-black. Flowers purple, sometimes pink or white, April to June.**

It would be irresponsible (and in most cases illegal) to dig up any of the dwindling colonies of early purple orchid, let alone for food. Yet this lilac-flowered woodland species has been one of the more fascinating and valuable of wild foods.

The tubers contain a starch-like polysaccharide called bassorine, and it is these tubers which have been used domestically, especially in the Middle East. In Turkey they are dug up after the plant has flowered, and made into a drink called *salep* or *sablep*. The tubers are dried in the sun and ground into a rough flour, which is mixed with honey and cinnamon and stirred into hot milk until it thickens. The popularity of this drink – and of ice-cream flavoured with the *salep* flour – has resulted in a serious decline in orchid numbers in Turkey.

In Britain, an almost identical drink called saloop was a common soft drink long before the introduction of coffee houses. In Victorian books it is mentioned as a tea-break beverage of manual workers. Charles Lamb referred to a 'Salopian shop' in Fleet Street, and suggested that, at a cost of just three half-pence, a basin of saloop, accompanied by a slice of bread and butter (costing a halfpenny), made a good breakfast for a chimney-sweep. They made it with water more often than with milk, sometimes lacing it with spirits, sometimes brewing it so thick that it had to be eaten with a spoon.







Fungi





# Fungi

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Wild and exotic fungi are becoming increasingly prized and more commonly found on restaurant menus and on supermarket shelves, where their strange shapes and unusual textures often command a premium in terms of price.

Yet wild fungi remain the most misunderstood and maligned of all wild foods. There are 3,000 species of large-bodied fungi growing in the British Isles, though only twenty-odd of these are seriously poisonous. Admittedly, many hundreds of the remainder are inedible because of toughness, indigestibility or taste. But this scarcely seems sufficient to explain the blackening of the reputation of a whole biological category. Robert Graves suggested that our hostility towards fungi may be a hangover from the time when there were religious taboos against their use by any persons outside the priesthood. I would guess that there are more down-to-earth reasons than this. It would be foolish to pretend that the identification of fungi is as easy as the identification of flowering plants. They have fewer differentiating characteristics, and even within one species can vary enormously, in shape, size and colour. Even though the number of poisonous species is comparatively very small, each one resembles maybe half-a-dozen edible types.

The unearthly qualities of fungi no doubt exaggerate these worries. They rise up quickly, in lightless places. Many of them thrive on the dead or dying remains of other plants – or worse, of animals. Their shapes can bear resemblances to other organisms, to corals, brains, ears and sexual parts.

But there is no doubt that much of the discomfort we feel about fungi is conditioned by culture and fashion. We do, after all, consume vast quantities of cultivated mushrooms, and are increasingly happy to buy other species of fungi from shops. So the characteristic fungoid taste is not in itself repugnant. And in other parts of the world – in China, Russia, Scandinavia, Mediterranean Europe, North America and south-east Asia, for example – there is extensive use of wild fungi.

There are over a hundred quite edible species growing in this country, and it is sad that so many of them are ignored. They have no especial food value (though they contain more protein than vegetables and considerable quantities of vitamin D), but there are some intriguing tastes and textures, and they are worthwhile trying for these alone.

There are no general rules about when and where fungi may be found. They grow in all sorts of environments at all times of the year. But there are some guidelines which can be deduced from the way that they grow. Fungi are characterised by the fact that they do not contain any chlorophyll, and are

thus unable to manufacture their own carbohydrates. They must live off those manufactured by other plants, either living or dead. Any ground which is rich in root structure or newly decaying plant litter is potentially good as a fungus bed. Mature woodlands and well-established pasture are both ideal environments. The more these host environments flourish, die and regenerate, the better off will be their attendant fungi. So although fungi have no use for direct light, they do prosper in areas where the underground growth and nutrient cycling of their hosts is stimulated by light: hedges, woodland clearings and paths, etc. They also like warmth and damp, and a year which begins with a long, fine summer, and continues with a wet, mild autumn, is likely to be as good for fungi as it is for other types of fruit. It is the right balance of sunlight, moisture and warmth which seems to be crucial. In wet summers fungi tend to appear more in woodland clearings; in dry summers in the shady, moisture-retaining spots. Some fungi appear in the spring and others can live through the winter. But the greatest number appear in the late summer and disappear with the first hard frosts.

## Some picking rules

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The following are a few suggestions about picking and preparation which apply to all fungi, and which will help guarantee you have good specimens this season, and more to come back to next.

- Only pick those which satisfy all the criteria on size, colour, time of year and environment that are given on the following pages. These have been chosen so that it is very difficult to make a mistake if you follow them to the letter. There are several other published guides which can help you make an accurate identification. If you are in any doubt about the identification, do not eat it.
- Do not pick specimens which are so old that they have started to decay, or so young that they have not yet developed their identifying characteristics.
- Avoid gathering on very wet days. Many fungi are highly porous, and a blewit, for instance, can soak up its own weight of water in a few hours. Moisture not only spoils the taste and texture but creates conditions where decomposition can proceed more quickly.
- When picking fungi, do not cut them with a knife, or yank them out of the ground, either. You will need the whole stalk (stipe), and any sheath (volva) for a full identification. The fungi we pick are simply the fruit bodies of the fungus proper, which is a complex net of fine threads called the mycelium growing underground. If this is broken by too careless picking, the fungus can be damaged. The best way of picking a fungus is to twist it gently until it breaks free.

- It is best to cut the earthy part of the stipe away before putting the mushroom into a basket. This will prevent it soiling those mushrooms already gathered, and will give a fair idea whether any maggots or insects have got into the cap via the stem.
- Gather your crop into an open, well-ventilated basket, not your pockets or a polythene bag. Fungi decay very quickly, and heat, congestion and stale air accelerate this process.
- Go through all your specimens again carefully before cooking. Check their identification and discard any you are not confident about. Indigestion brought on by uncertainty about whether you have done yourself in can be just as uncomfortable as real food poisoning. Remember there are no infallible tricks with sixpences or salt which can identify all poisonous species.
- To be especially careful cut each fungus in half and throw away any that are maggot-ridden or possessed of suspicious white gills (most of the deadly *Amanita* species have these). Also cut away decaying or wet pieces.
- Clean the fungi before cooking, by brushing or cutting away dirt. There is no need to wash them or peel them, unless it is specifically stated in the text. Use them within 24 hours of picking.
- In common with other new foods it is as well to try a fairly small portion the first time you eat any species. It is just possible that it may 'disagree with you'.

Having prepared your fungi, remember that there are many other ways of using them beyond the recipes given here for individual species. Drying is a useful way of preserving them for the winter. Special drying trays and small ovens are now available commercially, but to dry the fungi more cheaply, simply cut prepared specimens into slices about 5 mm thick and keep in a warm place or a dry current of air. Threading the slices (or the whole caps of smaller specimens) onto a string is a convenient and attractive way of doing this. They are dry when they feel crisp to the fingers and can be easily crumbled into small pieces. The fungi can be reconstituted by boiling in water for about twenty minutes. Fungi can also be pickled by being simmered in water for about ten minutes, drained and put in jars under ordinary pickling vinegar.

All edible fungi can be made into soup, using the recipe on p. 365, or ketchup (p. 374). There is also scope for a whole new range of recipes based on a view of them as fruits rather than savouries. Try them stewed with sugar, like plums, or added to cakes and puddings, as if they were currants.

Finally, find out if your local natural history society or wildlife trust holds fungus forays in the autumn. These traditional foraging expeditions have been revived all over the country, and there is no better way of getting to know the situations in which the different species grow, and how to look out for their identifying characteristics.

## Morel

*Morchella esculenta*

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Woodland clearings, old orchards and pastures (especially sandy soils), under broad-leaved trees, especially ash and elm. Unusual in appearing in spring, from March to May. The cap is wrinkled like a coarse sponge, variable in shape and colour but usually 3–6 cm (1–2 inches) across, light or dark brown. Cap fused to stem, which is white and hollow with no ring.

Morels are one of the most distinctive of fungi, of great reputation and long standing, and amongst the best to eat – but now sadly rare. They have a liking for burnt places, and there are records of colonies springing up on bomb sites during the Second World War. In eighteenth-century Germany, peasants reputedly went to the lengths of starting forest fires to encourage the growth of morels.

The morel's honeycomb structure means that it is apt to collect dirt and insects, and the caps must be cut in half and rinsed under running water – or dusted with a paintbrush – before use. They are sometimes blanched in boiling water before cooking.

Morels make good additions to stews and soups, and, being hollow, can be stuffed and baked. Sliced horizontally they produce crinkle-edged golden rings that can ornament omelettes or mushroom soups.

Morels only appear for a few days each spring, often after warm rains, and if you are lucky enough to find a hoard it is worth preserving them. They freeze well, in airtight plastic bags, or can be dried. Cut them in half vertically and hang up in a warm room until they are crisp.

Carter's eighteenth-century *Herbal* gives a recipe for 'fricassy of morelles' – unusual for a time when fungi were generally regarded with suspicion: 'Cleanse them from the Sand by washing them, and brown a Piece of Butter gold colour, and toss them up, and their own Liquor will stove them; season them only with Pepper, Salt, and Nutmeg, and an Onion, and a little minc'd Parsley; when stov'd tender, toss them up as a Fricassy, with the Yolk of an Egg and a little White Wine, and a little Cream and thick Butter, and so serve them; and you may garnish with Lemon.'





The following morels are also edible and good:

*Mitrophora semilibera*

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Quite common in damp copses on heavy soil in spring. Cap 2-4 cm ( $\frac{3}{4}$ -1½ inches), olive-brown, slightly pitted with rather regular vertical ribs. Stipe creamy-white, hollow.

*Morchella rotunda*

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In woods on heavy soils. Late spring. Cap 10-20 cm (4-8 inches), yellowish brown. Stipe rather stocky.

*Morchella vulgaris*

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As *M. esculenta* but with more sinuous and complex pitting. (Above)

## Morel and butter bean stew

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This is a recipe from Sam and Sam Clark, of Moro restaurant, who adapted it from a Turkish original. The combination of fungus and butter beans sounds improbable, but it works, chiefly because of the wonderful collision between these two warm and oddly-matched ingredients, and a cold sharp salad.

100 g (4 oz) dried  
butter beans  
150 g (5 oz) fresh  
morels, or 40 g  
(1 ½ oz) dried  
olive oil  
lemon juice  
1 clove of garlic  
½ a red onion  
a mixture of chopped  
sweet herbs – basil,  
tarragon, parsley, dill,  
whatever you can find,  
amounting to about 2  
tbs in all  
12 ripe cherry tomatoes  
salt and pepper

Dried butter beans are so incomparably better than tinned that going through the longer preparation needed is worth it. Soak the beans overnight in a large bowl of water (they expand quite a lot). Next day drain the butter beans and set them to simmer for about 40 minutes in clean water. Meanwhile rinse the fresh morels, or soak the dried ones in water for an hour, to clean and reconstitute. Make the dressing by beating together in a bowl 2 tablespoons of olive oil, a tablespoon of lemon juice and 1 crushed clove of garlic. Chop the onion with herbs, slice the cherry tomatoes into quarters, and mix both with seasoned dressing. When everything is ready, keep the beans warm in their cooking liquid and fry the morels in olive oil for about 5 minutes, until they are soft. (The dried ones may take a little longer.) Add the beans, and bring briefly to the boil. The remove from the heat and fold in (don't stir too much) the dressed tomatoes. Serve immediately.







## False Morel

*Gyromitra esculenta*

 POISONOUS

The only species that might conceivably be mistaken for morels. Rather scarce, found under pines on sandy soils, and near the sites of bonfires in spring, like morel, but only really common in the central Highlands. Cap 5–10 cm (2–4 inches), with brain-like lobes, russet to rusty brown in colour. Flesh pale, bitter, strong-smelling. Stem short, stout, hollow, multi-chambered like the cap (the true morel has a single-chambered stem). The false morel is highly poisonous when raw, but the toxins are destroyed by cooking.

# Truffle

*Tuber aestivum*

Sometimes found in woodland in the south of England; prefers limestone soils. An underground fungus, mostly about the size of a golf ball, 3–7 cm (1–3 inches). The outside has a somewhat warty appearance, blue-black in colour when fresh, turning to brown-black. The flesh is yellow-white, later brown with white marbling.

The highly prized Périgord or black truffle (*Tuber melanosporum*) is not found in Britain, though the summer truffle (*T. aestivum*) does occur. Truffles are all but impossible to find without specially trained animals. Truffle hunting is still part of the rural economy of mainland Europe, particularly in France and Italy, and there was once a lively traffic in them in some of the southern counties of England, where they were sniffed out of beech woods by Spanish poodles.

The last professional truffle hunter in Britain, Alfred Collins, retired in 1930. Before that time truffle hunting in the Winterslow area of Wiltshire had a tradition going back 300 years. Between November and March Alfred would scour the countryside together with his dogs. Dogs have to be trained to dig out truffles, in the same way that they are trained to sniff out drugs by police and customs officers, but pigs (which were not much used in Britain) hunt for truffles naturally. Apparently Alfred Collins became so experienced in his trade that he could smell truffles while they were still in the ground. He could also feel them underfoot, and judge from clouds of flies whether a truffle was lying beneath the topsoil.

It was clearly a thriving small business, providing income for all sorts of people. In a 1971 article for *Country Life*, J. E. Manners described how the truffles were found and distributed:

'Normally, the hunter worked up wind and his dogs could scent the truffles frequently from a distance of twenty yards upwards. Truffles were invariably sold to private customers so they rarely came on the market. They only kept for about four days before losing flavour so they were always posted off as soon as possible in cardboard shoe boxes, which the children collected from the bootmaker for a penny each. Any not despatched were eaten by children on bread and butter. They could be preserved in vinegar. Like mushrooms they grew and then dispersed fairly quickly, the process taking about two days.'

Although the milder flavour of the summer truffle is inferior to that of its Périgord counterpart, it should certainly be regarded as an exciting find. Gently brush any soil away from the skin, and make sure you slice it thinly to get maximum use out of it. It can be added to stuffings and patés, and can make

luxurious omelettes and scrambled eggs. The truffle can also be used to flavour oil, which also serves to preserve the fungus, though it will reduce its flavour. Truffle oil is very rich and should be used sparingly.

*Tuber aestivum* can be confused with the false truffle, or hart's truffle (*Elaphomyces granulatus*). This is one of the most frequently found underground fungi, developing just below the surface in woodland soil, especially in coniferous woods with pine. About the size of a large marble – the ones that used to be so highly prized in school playgrounds – the false truffle's skin is thick, warty and red-brown. The flesh is flecked purple-brown and darkens as the spores mature. This species is not edible, and when uncovered can be told by the fact that it has no distinctive smell.

### Truffle soufflé omelette (from Rose Elliot)

A sumptuous cross between a soufflé and an omelette is created by folding beaten egg whites into egg yolks that have been mixed well with a little water and seasoning. Pour the mixture into a heated and buttered pan and cook until golden underneath. Put the pan under the grill until the top is golden, then make a cut across the middle of the omelette (but not right through), sprinkle truffle shavings over one half, and fold the other half over. Serve with a little parsley sprinkled on top.



## Cauliflower Fungus, Sparassis

*Sparassis crispa*


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Found at the base of pine stumps or living trees, August to November. Resembles a large round natural sponge or the heart of a cauliflower, 15–40 cm (6–15 inches) across, with flat, twisted and very divided branches. The colour varies with age from pale cream to ochre. (Opposite, top left and opposite, top right.)

If you are lucky enough to find a *Sparassis* nestling at the bottom of a pine (the Swiss call it 'the broody hen') it should be cut off from its thick fleshy stalk with a knife. Only young specimens should be gathered, as the old ones are tough and bitter.

Cut the *Sparassis* into sections, making it easier to clean, and remove any brown or spongy parts. Then wash thoroughly to remove any dirt and insects from the folds. An old recipe for very young specimens is to bake them in a casserole with butter, parsley, a little garlic, and some stock and seasoning. They taste mild and pleasantly nutty, which also makes them a good addition to soups and stews. Rather older specimens are best dried until they are brittle, for future use as flavouring.

*Ramaria formosa*

 POISONOUS

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Uncommon, under broad-leaved trees. Pink, coral-like branches up to about 15 cm (6 inches) tall. This is the only slightly dangerous species with which *Sparassis* could conceivably be confused. It has pink, rounded branches. *Ramaria formosa* is purgative, but not seriously poisonous. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)





## Horn of Plenty

*Craterellus cornucopioides*

Fairly common in leafy woods, especially beech, August to November. Funnel-shaped, with a heavy, crinkled margin to the cap, 2–8 cm (1–3 inches) across, brown-black in colour. Lower surface of cap continuous with stem, and smooth or slightly wrinkled. No ring.

The flesh of this species is thin and leathery and tastes of earth when eaten raw, but it is highly prized for culinary purposes. When you get it home, check that the base is free from dirt and insects before sautéing until softened. The caps can then be stuffed, or used in sauces or soups. Horn of plenty is also good for drying.

## Yellow Legs, White Feet, Black Toenails

My friend Duncan Mackey has created an extraordinary extravaganza using horn of plenty (aka *trompette de mort*), which, as he says, is 'in its purest, wildest form ... a tide-dependent, habitat-fixed, once-a-year recipe'.

Firstly, buy a set of tide tables and determine the date of the very lowest November tide for your nearest sandy (and safe) estuary known as a habitat for razor-shells. At low tide point make sure you are at the edge of the sea with a salt-cellar in your hand. Look for the oval filter holes of razor-shells that should be distinguishable from lugworm holes because the holes are about the size of your finger. Test the hole for size by very gently poking your finger in it and tip a dose of salt into the depression. Sometimes the razor-shells give themselves away as you approach them by sending up a spurt of water as they frantically dig deeper into the sand. In Scotland they are thus called 'spoots'. After salting one likely hole, walk, softly stepped, on to the next one and repeat the action in 7 or 8 holes. At which point, stretch your back and quietly return to your first hole where the razor-shell should have now magically popped up out of the sand. Haul the shell gently out of the beach sand taking care not to damage the long (and vigorously wagging) white 'foot'. Not every hole will yield a catch but with patience and luck you should eventually easily collect 6 'razor-fish'. Help to conserve wild razor-fish stocks by taking only as many as you need.

Back at the kitchen put the razor-fish in a pan of cold salted freshwater to let them gently expire. Then head for the nearest beechwoods to collect 24 large winter chanterelles (p. 337) and 12 medium sized trumpets of death. Clean and pare away any gritty bits from the fungi and dry off any moisture. Cut the trumpets in half and shake out any creatures. Prepare the razor-fish by opening the bivalve at the edge with a knife and cutting off the long white fleshy 'foot' (other parts can also be eaten or used as fishing bait). Cut each one into 4 pieces and pat dry. Heat some oil in a pan and ensure it is hot by chucking in a small piece of bread that should go light brown in under a minute. Quickly make up sufficient tempura batter with a little cold water to coat your collection of pieces. Fry them briskly in the order: razor-fish, yellow legs, trumpets, until the batter is golden. Serve immediately as a starter with crusty bread, wild crab apple juice (verjuice) and a fresh mayonnaise dip. If the tide isn't right you can substitute the razor-fish with scallops with their white cut meat in quarters and the red coral left whole. In which case it becomes Yellow Legs, White Feet, Pink Socks, Black Toenails! If you can't get to the sea or find any razor-fish then most good fishmongers can order some for you (from *Eat Wild*).



# Chanterelle

*Cantharellus cibarius*

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Local in all kinds of woodland, but especially beech, between July and December. Shaped like a funnel, 2–7 cm (1–3 inches) across. Egg-yolk yellow in colour and smelling slightly of apricots. Gills like fan-vaulting or veins, shallow, much forked and continuous with the stem. No ring. (Opposite)

Chanterelles have long been regarded as among the most desirable fungi. An eighteenth-century writer even said that if they were placed in the mouths of dead men they would come to life again. In her book *Food in England*, Dorothy Hartley wrote ... 'You find them, suddenly, in the autumn woods, sometimes clustered so close that they look like a torn golden shawl dropped amongst the dead leaves and sticks.'

Because they are seldom attacked by insects, and are unlikely to be confused with any dangerous species, chanterelles (*grollets*) are extensively eaten throughout mainland Europe. They are slightly tougher than some other fungi and should be stewed slowly in milk for at least ten minutes. The result is delicately perfumed and slightly peppery. They can also be sliced and fried with garlic, parsley or lemon juice. Perhaps because of colour sympathy, chanterelles have always been associated with eggs, and there is scarcely any better way of serving previously cooked specimens than in omelettes or with scrambled eggs.

Be careful of false chanterelle (*Hygrophoropsis aurantiaca*) which is not worth eating and may be poisonous to some. This species is more common with conifers and on heathland. It is more orange than the true chanterelle, and lacks the fruity smell. Also avoid jack o'lantern (*Omphalotus olearius*) which occasionally appears on sweet chestnut and oak trees in southern England. It has an unpleasant smell. Finally there are two *Cortinarius* species (*C. orellanus* and *C. speciosissimus*), which are both rare but poisonous.

## Chanterelle bouillon

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René Redzepi, who employs more than 70 wild ingredients in his famous Copenhagen restaurant Noma, uses an entire autumn landscape to make a soup with chanterelles. He creates the base by long simmering of birch twigs, a few small pine cones, dried woodruff and black tea-leaves in chicken stock. The bouillon is strained, whisked egg-whites are added, then warmed with a little vinegar to clarify it, and strained again. Finally, hazelnuts and small raw ceps (see p. 378) are thinly sliced with a mandolin, and mixed with chanterelles which have been quickly sautéed in butter, and the warm bouillon poured over.



## Winter Chanterelle

*Cantharellus infundibuliformis*

Found in clusters in all kinds of woodland, July to January. Funnel-shaped, with a slightly crinkled margin. Cap 2.5–5 cm (1–2 inches) across and dark brown. Stem deep yellow. Gills fold-like and branched as in the chanterelle. No ring.

This fairly common relative of the chanterelle can be used in much the same way.



## Wood Hedgehog

*Hydnum repandum*

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Uncommon in all kinds of woodland, August to November. The cap is irregularly shaped, up to 15 cm (6 inches) across, and is covered with a matt buffish to pink skin, smooth and often cracked, like fine leather. The 'gills' take the form of unmistakable tiny white spines of unequal length. Stem short, stout, whitish. No ring.

The genus *Hydnum* is unique amongst fungi in having spines instead of gills, and all the commoner species having this characteristic are edible. Once you have picked the fungi, any dirt trapped in the spines can be removed with a knife. It is best to remove the spines completely from older caps.

The wood hedgehog is the commonest *Hydnum* species, and is good to eat once its slightly bitter taste has been removed. This is best done by boiling the chopped fungus for a few minutes and then draining off and discarding the water. Then simmer in milk or stock for a further ten minutes, or slice and fry lightly. Serve on toast with a dash of sherry sprinkled over the top. Its firm texture makes it good for freezing (once cooked), and it can also be pickled.

### *Sarcodon imbricatum*

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Occurs occasionally in sandy conifer woods between August and November, particularly in hilly districts. A conventional mushroom-shaped cap fungus, greyish brown in colour, with a scaly cap and the usual spiny gill structure of the *Hydnum* family.

This close relative of the wood hedgehog has an excellently strong, spicy flavour, and is consequently useful as a flavouring.



## Beefsteak Fungus

*Fistulina hepatica*

Occurs on living trees, especially old oak or sweet chestnut, August to October. A large, red bracket fungus, 20–40 cm (8–16 inches) in diameter. Resembles an ox tongue, rough and sticky, becoming drier and smoother with age. The top is reddish brown, and the underside is covered with minute yellow pores which exude a blood-like juice when bruised.

This is an aptly named fungus, for the flesh when cut looks and feels like prime raw beef. Regrettably, the beefsteak fungus does *not* really fulfil its visual promise, and the meat is rather tough and bitter. It is best chopped small and fried well with some other fairly strongly flavoured ingredients, such as onions and herbs. Stewing repeatedly in water, changing the water each time, can remove the acid that makes the fungus bitter. Even then the acrid taste is not completely destroyed, though in good specimens it is pleasantly reminiscent of unripe tomatoes.



## St George's Mushroom

*Calocybe gambosa*

Old grassland, downs and dunes throughout Britain, April to June. Cap 5–12 cm (2–5 inches) across when young, later flatter with wavy edges. Cap, gills and stem all creamy-white in colour.

This is the French *mousseron*, unmistakable as the only large white mushroom to appear in spring – traditionally around St George's Day, 23 April. It likes old grassland – chalk downland, grassy woodland edges and even churchyards. It has a strong, mealy, almost yeasty smell, though this is less pronounced in younger specimens.

St George's mushrooms are firm, not often attacked by insects, and can generally be treated like field mushrooms. But some people find the aroma of mature specimens a little too heady and rich, and they are probably best used in dishes where there is another strongly flavoured ingredient – for instance in quiches with cheese and spinach or spring greens.



## Field Blewit

*Lepista saeva*

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Not uncommon in grassy pastures, October to December. The cap is flat-tish with an incurving marginal edge, 5–12 cm (2–5 inches) across, dry to touch but slightly jellyish and translucent, pale brown to greyish in colour. Gills crowded, white to greyish-pink. Stem stout, tinged with blue and occasionally swollen at the base. No ring. Flesh white and firm.

Blewits, named after the bluish-violet tinge of their stems, were one of the few fungi once sold commercially in Britain. The trade was especially strong in the Midlands, and it is from there that the traditional way of cooking blewits as tripe comes.

Blewits often grow in large rings, and it is easy to overlook them in the late autumn, for their flat irregular caps look like dead leaves scattered over the field. Pick them on a dry day (they are very porous), clean, and chop off their stems. One way to serve this excellent fungus is to cook them like tripe (see below) – which is probably not entirely fortuitous, for their aromatic taste and jellyish texture are indeed reminiscent of tripe. Fried with onions, and perhaps chopped potato, they also make an excellent omelette filling. Or they can be dried, pickled or frozen.

### Blewits, tripe-style

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Remove the stems and chop them finely with an equal amount of onions, then pack this mixture round the caps with a little chopped sage and bacon fat. Just cover the blewits with milk and simmer for half an hour. Pour off the liquid, thicken with flour and butter and seasoning and pour back over the fungi mixture. Simmer for another quarter of an hour, and then serve the whole mixture inside a ring of mashed potatoes, with toast and apple sauce.

## Wood Blewit

*Lepista nuda*

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Mixed woodlands and gardens, September to December. Cap 5–10 cm (2–4 inches) across, turning reddish with age. Gills crowded, stem stout and mealy and always a little swollen at the base. No ring. Flesh tinged with violet at first, becoming whiter with age. Sweet-smelling. (Opposite)

The woodland equivalent of the field blewit, very similar but bluish or violet all over when young. Use as field blewits, but do not eat raw, as they can be indigestible.



## Honey Fungus

*Armillaria mellea*

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Abundant throughout Britain on tree stumps, roots, buried branches, September to December. Tufts of caps 5–12 cm (2–5 inches) across, yellow to olive-brown, convex with brownish scales when young, flattening with age. Gills creamy-white, darkening with age. Stipe yellowish, with a shaggy yellow ring.

Honey fungus is a destructive parasite on all kinds of timber, recognisable from the black rhizomes encircling its host, which resemble a network of leather bootlaces. Collect the caps when young, when the gills are white, and do not eat raw. Blanch before cooking, then fry slowly. They have a strong flavour and firm texture, and are best served in small quantities on the first tasting, as they can be quite rich for some people. Probably best added to stews.







## Anise Cap

*Clitocybe odora*

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A small fungus which occurs in the litter of mixed woodlands, especially beech and oak on chalky soils, August to November. The whole fungus is a uniform blue-green colour, and has a strong, unmistakable smell of aniseed. Cap 3–6 cm (1–2 inches) across, becoming lighter, flatter and wavy with age.

The aniseed smell persists on drying, and either fresh or dried the anise cap can be used as a flavouring. It is good for flavouring fish in place of fennel.



## Velvet Shank, Winter Mushroom

*Flammulina velutipes*

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Common in clusters on stumps and trunks between September and March. The caps are thin, about 2–8 cm (1–3 inches) across, sticky and glistening, and honey-yellow to orange-red in colour. Gills broad and pale yellow. Stem thin, tough, often curved, dark brown in colour and covered with a dark velvety down. The flesh is thin, whitish and rubbery with no smell.

This is one of the few fungi able to survive through frosts. During the winter months there is consequently very little chance that it might be confused with another species. They can even be picked while frozen, and either stored in a deep freeze or added to stews and casseroles. Make sure you discard the stems and wipe the stickiness off the cap before using them. Add a few towards the last stages of cooking a stew and they will float on the surface like fungal water-lilies. The Japanese *enoki*, or *enokitake*, is a cultivated variety of this species.



## Fairy-ring Champignon

*Marasmius oreades*

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Very common on lawns and short grassland, April to December, often growing in 'fairy rings'. The cap, 2–5 cm (1–2 inches) across, has a slight bump in the centre. When moist, the top is smooth and buffish in colour, and when dry, the skin wrinkles, becomes hard and leathery and changes to pale tan in colour. Gills wide and usually free of the stipe, which is tough and fibrous. The smell is pleasantly aromatic, a little like new-mown hay scented with bitter almonds.

This is one of the best and most versatile toadstools – though care must be taken to distinguish it from somewhat similar small, white and poisonous *Clitocybe* species that can grow on lawns.

The fairy-ring champignon's natural tendency to dry out is one of its great virtues, and means that the caps can be easily preserved by threading them on strings and hanging them for a week or two in a dry, well-ventilated room. Discard the tough stems before threading. They can be reconstituted by soaking in water overnight. The other virtues of the fairy-ring champignon are its almond fragrance and nutty texture – it is prized for its flavour rather than its bulk. Add them to stews and casseroles, or fry them with chopped almonds or hazelnuts.

# Oyster Mushroom

*Pleurotus ostreatus*

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Common on dead or dying branches of beech and ash round the year, though principally in late autumn and winter. This is a bracket fungus, growing on the branch or trunk in shelves up to 20 cm (8 inches) across. The cap is shell-shaped, convex at first, then flat, grey or slate-blue in colour. Gills white and deep. Flesh white, soft, rubbery.

The oyster mushroom tends to be rather tough, and you should choose young specimens and cook them thoroughly. But when you find it, it is usually possible to gather considerable quantities from the clusters in which it invariably grows, so it should not be passed over. Inspect carefully for maggots when cleaning. Because of their comparatively mild flavour, oyster mushrooms can be served with fairly rich sauces. They can also be grilled, added to stews and casseroles, and dried.

Oyster mushrooms are one of the few wild species that are now being successfully cultivated. Many supermarkets stock them, and it is possible to grow your own from specially prepared and prespawnd 'logs'.

## Deep-fried oyster mushrooms

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Slice the mushrooms into pieces not more than 1 cm ( $\frac{1}{2}$  inch) thick, sprinkling with a few drops of lemon juice, turning in seasoned flour, then in beaten egg and finally in breadcrumbs. The slices should then be deep-fried in oil until golden.

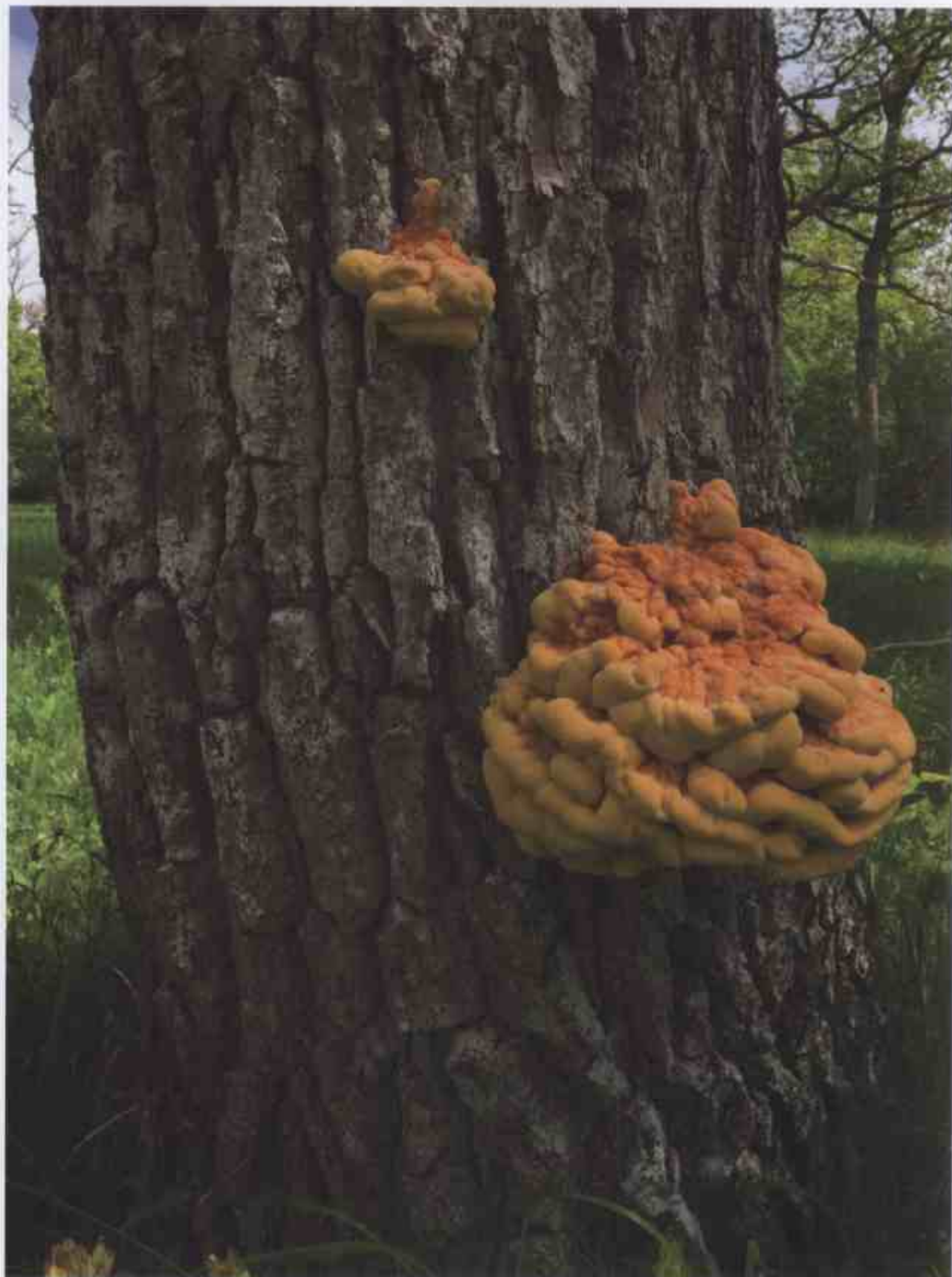
## Oyster mushrooms in Madeira sauce

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Slice the mushrooms about 1 cm ( $\frac{1}{2}$  inch) thick, and fry in oil for 5 minutes until the juices begin to flow. Sprinkle a little flour into the pan, and then stir in a glass of Madeira or sherry. Add a beaten egg yolk and seasoning. Simmer and stir until the mixture thickens. Serve on toast or fried bread.







## Chicken-of-the-woods

*Lactiporus sulphureus*

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Quite widespread on deciduous trees, especially oak, from late spring to autumn. The fan-shaped brackets can be up to 40 cm across, and are thick and fleshy, with an uneven surface that is reminiscent of lemon-yellow suede.

Chicken-of-the-woods' name may possibly come from its plump, broody-hen presence, nestling, as it often does, at the base of trees. But it may also refer to the succulent, slightly yellow flesh of the young specimens (older, duller, coloured specimens are too tough and bitter to eat).

A favourite recipe in the USA, picked up by the mycologist Geoffrey Kibby, and popularised by Roger Phillips in *Wild Food*, is to use cubes (say 2 cm square) of the young fungus in beef or pork casseroles. They should be given about half an hour in the pot. The fungus also freezes well.

## *Amanita* species

The *Amanita* family contains some of the commonest and most toxic of all poisonous fungi. All the dangerous species have a white sheath surrounding the base of the stem, a white ring, and white gills. Avoid all fungi that have this combination.

### Panthercap

 POISONOUS

*Amanita pantherina*

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Rather uncommon under broad-leaved trees. Cap 5–10 cm (2–4 inches) across, fawn to russet-brown in colour, flecked with pure white scales. Gills, stem, ring and sheath white. (Opposite, top left.)

### Deathcap

 POISONOUS

*Amanita phalloides*

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Uncommon under broad-leaved trees, and occasionally conifers. Cap 5–12 cm (2–5 inches) across, smooth, yellowish green. Gills, stem and ring white. Sheath very pronounced, like an open sack. (Opposite, top right.)

### Destroying Angel

 DEADLY  
POISONOUS

*Amanita virosa*

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Scarce under broad-leaved trees on acid soils. Cap 5–8 cm (2–3 inches) across. All parts – cap, gills, stem, ring, sheath – pure white. (Opposite, bottom left.)

### Fly Agaric

 POISONOUS

*Amanita muscaria*

---

Very common in birch and pine woods. Cap 10–20 cm (4–8 inches) across, bright vermilion fading to orange, and usually flecked with white scales. Gills and stem white. Ring white, with remnants of veil. Sheath white. (Opposite, bottom right.)









## Parasol Mushroom

*Macrolepiota procera*

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Wood margins, grassy clearings, roadsides, July to November. A large fungus, up to 30 cm (12 inches) tall and 20 cm (8 inches) across. When young the cap resembles an old-fashioned, domed beehive. It then spreads out flat but always retains its dark central prominence. It is dry, scaly, brown to grey-brown. Gills white and detached from the stem. Stem tall, slender, hollow and bulbous at the base and slightly scaly like the cap. Large white double ring which eventually becomes completely free of the stem so that it can be moved up and down.

With its large, dry cap, the parasol is one of the best of our edible fungi. It is also one of the most distinctive, and can often be seen from afar because of its size and preference for open spaces. The parasol rises closed, held to the stem by its large white ring. It then breaks free and opens like an umbrella. For the best combination of size and tenderness it should be picked just when the cap begins to open.

To cook, remove the stems and fry the caps quickly in oil or butter like field mushrooms. Alternatively, to avoid the caps soaking up too much fat, coat them first in batter or breadcrumbs. The shape of the more mature caps makes them suitable for making into fritters. Prepare the caps by removing the stalks, and wiping clean. Then dip them, whole, into flour, then batter, and deep-fry in oil for about five minutes.

### Stuffed parasols

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Because of their shape young parasols are ideal for stuffing. Choose specimens that are still cup-shaped, cut off and discard the stems and fill with a sage and onion stuffing (or with mince or sausage meat if you want a more substantial dish). Arrange them their natural way up in a baking tray. For even more flavour, fasten a small strip of bacon fat to the top of each parasol with a skewer. Cook in the oven for about 30 minutes, basting once or twice.





## Shaggy Parasol

*Macrolepiota rhacodes*

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Not uncommon on rich ground, though prefers more shade than the common parasol. July to November. Very similar to previous species, but the cap is scallier and the stem quite smooth. Flesh white but reddens on cutting.

A lookalike species which can be cooked in the same way as the common parasol. Note that the shaggy parasol has rarely caused digestive upsets and rashes on skin.



## Field Mushroom

*Agaricus campestris*

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Locally common in pastures and meadows, July to November. Cap white, 3–10 cm (1–4 inches) across. Gills pink at first, darkening to brown. Stem short with a ring which in young specimens is joined to the cap. No sheath at base of stem, and no unpleasant smell.

Field mushrooms have a special liking for meadows manured by horses, and the passing of horse-drawn transport, followed by increasing intensification of agriculture and the use of artificial fertilisers, has seriously affected the abundance of mushroom fields. There was a time when such fields might experience a 'white-out', when the precisely right combination of temperature, humidity and soil condition produced so many mushrooms simultaneously that the field appeared to have been covered overnight by snow. But in normal quantities they are, paradoxically, one of the less easy fungi to identify exactly. There is virtually nothing which could be mistaken for a sparassis or a chanterelle, but there are one or two white-capped meadow fungi which can be taken for mushrooms by the careless. But if you study cultivated mushrooms carefully, and go only for similar pink-gilled, sheathless specimens from the wild, you are unlikely to make a mistake.

Gathering mushrooms is a skill which has to be learned. They do not loom up above the grass as in fairy-story illustrations. In the rather dense pasture that is their natural habitat they are sometimes only visible as bright white patches in the grass when you are almost on top of them. You must train your eyes to scan no more than a few feet in front of you as you methodically quarter a field. When you find one, examine the area around it especially thoroughly, as mushrooms, like other fungi, tend to grow in colonies from the parent mycelium.

When you have your mushrooms check them again to make sure there are none with greenish-tinged or warty caps, or with remnants of sheath at the bottom of the stems. And until you are expert at recognising the 'jizz' of mushrooms it is as well to be doubly cautious and cut each specimen in half vertically. Discard any with pure white gills, or that quickly stain pink or yellow. The blusher (*Amanita rubescens*) and the yellow-staining mushroom (*Agaricus xanthodermus*) can both be mistaken for the field mushroom, and though neither of them is dangerously poisonous, they can cause digestive disturbances.

There is no need to peel mushrooms – indeed the taste will be diminished if you do. Simply wipe the caps with a dampish cloth and cut off the base of the stem. The very best way of cooking mushrooms is to fry them in bacon fat as





soon as possible after collecting. The secret is to give them no more than three or four minutes in the pan. Field mushrooms tend to contain more water than cultivated, and if they are cooked for too long, they stew in their own liquid and become limp and mushy. Making soup from wild mushrooms avoids this danger. Young field mushrooms can also be used raw in salads, and ripe, dark-gilled ones for ketchup (see recipe on p. 374).

## Mushroom soup

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Simmer the chopped caps and stems in seasoned milk for about 30 minutes with no other ingredients at all. Liquidise in a blender if desired. The result is a smooth, light soup which is good hot or cold.

## Mushroom pâté

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200 g (8 oz) field mushrooms

1 onion

1 tomato

1 rasher of bacon  
(optional)

1 egg, beaten

Seasoning to taste

- Chop the mushrooms with the onion, tomato and bacon. Cook slowly in a little oil until the mushrooms begin to sweat, and simmer for 10 minutes. If they give off a great deal of liquid, drain some of this away.
- Cool and transfer to a blender and blitz until the mixture is smooth.
- Return to the pan, add seasoning and herbs to taste, perhaps a pinch of chilli powder, and finally the beaten egg. Stir over a low heat until the texture thickens.
- Refrigerate for at least 12 hours, when it will acquire the consistency of a pâté, and a surprisingly meaty taste.



## Bleeding Brown Mushroom

*Agaricus haemorrhoidarius*

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Common under broad-leaved trees, especially oak, among soil and dead leaves. Cap 10–12 cm (4–5 inches), hazel-brown with faint reddish-brown scales. Gills pink. Flesh white, turning blood-red when cut. Double ring. September.



## Brown Wood Mushroom

*Agaricus silvaticus*

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Common under conifers. Cap 5–9 cm (2–3½ inches), covered with russet-brown scales. Gills reddish. Flesh white, staining orange-red, then blood-red, when cut. Large ring. August to October. (Above)

## Wood Mushroom

*Agaricus silvicola*

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Occasional in deciduous and coniferous woodland. Cap 5–10 cm (2–4 inches), white, turning yellow and eventually orange. Gills pinkish-grey. Flesh white, becoming yellow. Smells of aniseed. August to November.



*Agaricus macrosporus*

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The usual *Agaricus* of pastures in the Highlands. Cap 20–30 cm (8–12 inches), very fleshy and silky-white, remains convex. Flesh thick, white, flushing pink at the base, smelling slightly of aniseed.

*Agaricus augustus*

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Occasional in parks, gardens and broad-leaved woods. Cap 12–18 cm (5–7 inches), covered with golden-brown scales. Flesh white, flushing pink towards the base and yellowing in the cap. Smells of bitter almonds.



## Cultivated Mushroom

*Agaricus bisporus*

---

Occasional in fields and gardens, and on manure. Cap 5–10 cm (2–4 inches), white, browning slightly on the top. Flesh grows slightly pink with age and reddens when cut. Large ring. This is the most common species in cultivation. (Below)

*Agaricus bitorquis*

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Common in southeast England on waste ground, field edges, pavement cracks, etc. Cap 6–12 cm (2½–5 inches), white. Flesh dingy white, turning pale wine-coloured eventually. Smells of almonds.



## Horse Mushroom

*Agaricus arvensis*

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Very like a large field mushroom. Grows in similar habitats and at the same time of year. Can be up to 30 cm (1 ft) across when mature. Cap white, yellowing with age. Bruises yellow-brown on handling. Gills greyer than in the field mushroom. Smells pleasantly of almonds.

This close cousin of the field mushroom is also becoming uncommon. But it is a large, meaty and flavourful fungus, and if you only succeed in finding one mature specimen you have enough for a good meal. Remember to check for maggots. Avoid specimens that bruise bright yellow, in case they are the poisonous yellow-staining mushroom.

If horse mushrooms are still dome-shaped they can be stuffed with tomatoes. If they are flat, grill them whole like steaks. Otherwise use as field mushroom.

### Horse mushroom and redcurrants

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Stew the mushrooms in milk, drain, set in a dish of white sauce, and then garnish with whole redcurrants made hot to the point of bursting. The dish is a contrast in colour and texture: the bright and sharp against the dark and fleshy.





## Yellow-staining Mushroom

 POISONOUS

*Agaricus xanthodermus*

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Parks, open woodland and gardens under broad-leaved trees. Very similar in appearance to a small horse mushroom. Cap 5–11 cm (2–4 inches) across, creamy-white, often with small brown scales in the middle. Gills white at first, turning grey-pink and finally dark brown. Stipe turns bright chrome-yellow if cut near the base. The smell is also distinctive, reminiscent of ink or iodine. Can cause acute, if temporary, digestive upsets in susceptible persons.

*Agaricus placomyces*

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Similar to the yellow-stainer except that the cap is covered with dark scales. Indigestible rather than poisonous, but best avoided. (Opposite)

## Shaggy Inkcap, Lawyer's Wig

*Coprinus comatus*

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Fields, road verges, playing fields, rubbish tips, June to November. A tall, shaggy, scaly fungus, 8–25 cm (3–10 inches) high. Cap almost cylindrical at first, white and covered with scales. Opens to resemble a limp umbrella. Gills white at first, then pink to black as the cap opens, finally dissolving into an inky fluid. Stem white and smooth with a small white ring at first.

The shaggy inkcap has a preference for grassland that is managed by humans rather than animals. It can often be found in large numbers in the short mown grass by roadsides, even on roundabouts and the central reservations of dual carriageways. It comes up like a white busby and can scarcely be mistaken for any other species, save perhaps its close relative *Coprinus atramentarius*. This too is edible, but can produce nausea if eaten together with alcohol. *Coprinus atramentarius* can be distinguished by its dirty grey colour, its absence of scales, its generally more slender build and lack of ring.

The shaggy inkcap should be gathered whilst the cap is still closed and the gills pale, and should be cooked as soon as possible after picking, before the cap starts to dissolve. Remove dirt by wiping with a damp cloth. Once the stems have been removed, the caps can be fried quickly in oil or butter, or deep-fried in breadcrumbs. Or you can bake them in a very slow casserole with cream or a mustard-flavoured roux for up to one hour. The taste is pleasant and mild, a little like shellfish in texture, but perhaps too innocuous for some palates. Alternatively, a nice conceit is to open a cap so that it resembles a starfish, remove the stem and place it on top of a raw egg in a dish. Then bake in a medium oven for 15 minutes.

### Shaggy inkcap ketchup

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A good way to capitalise on the deliquescent nature of shaggy inkcaps is to turn them into ketchup. Put the young caps into an earthenware jar, pack them down well and strew each layer with salt. When the jar is full put it in the oven, and simmer for an hour or two, being careful not to lose too much liquid by evaporation. Then strain through muslin, and for each quart of liquid add an ounce of black pepper and a scrape of nutmeg. Boil up again, strain into clean (preferably sterilised) bottles and seal well. The ketchup will keep indefinitely, but should be used quickly once opened.







## Red-staining Inocybe

 POISONOUS

*Inocybe patouillardii*

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Uncommon in woodland glades, parks, etc. Cap 5–7 cm (2–3 inches), conical. Gills, stipe and flesh whitish, but soon reddening with age or bruising. Smells fruity. Many inocybe species are toxic, but most grow in woodland habitats, not in the open grassland favoured by the fairy-ring champignon. The most seriously poisonous member of the family, red-staining inocybe, is unfortunately sometimes an exception. Avoid all inocybes. (Opposite)

*Galerina mutabilis*

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Found in clusters on tree stumps from April onwards. Cap 2–8 cm (1–3 inches) across, dark brown and slightly sticky when damp, drying from the centre to a pale chamois-leather colour. Gills cinnamon. Stem dark brown and scaly up to the prominent ring; above ring, pale brown and smooth.

One of the earliest fungi to appear, and difficult to confuse with any other species if it is picked in the spring. Although the caps are rather small and thin-fleshed, the clusters can contain literally hundreds, and certainly enough for a good meal. The fungus has an agreeable flavour, and is excellent for flavouring soups and stews, to which it gives a rich brown colour.

# Cep

*Boletus edulis*

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Quite common in rides and clearings in all sorts of woods, especially beech, August to November. Cap, brown, dry and smooth, 5–25 cm (2–10 inches) across. Gills in *Boletus* are replaced by pores, much like sponge rubber in appearance, and in *Boletus edulis* they are yellow to olive-brown in colour. Stem short and bulging, pale brown streaked with white. No ring. Flesh white, firm and pleasant-smelling.

All members of the *Boletus* family are distinguishable by their 'gills', which are a spongy mass of fine tubes beneath the cap. The cep has the additional distinction of looking exactly like a glossy penny bun, to which it is often compared. Alternative names include penny bun, king bolete and porcini.

Ceps are one of the most famous of all edible fungi, and at one time there were six different varieties for sale at Covent Garden. Unfortunately they are equally well liked by insects, so it is as well to cut the caps in half before cooking to check that they are not infested. To prepare for cooking remove the stem, and scoop away the pores with a spoon (unless they are very young and firm).

They are delicious sliced and eaten raw, but there is a prodigious number of recipes for ceps. They can be sliced and fried in oil for a few minutes with a little garlic and parsley. They can be fried with potatoes, or grilled with fish. They are excellent for drying (and indeed in the dried form are quite widely available in delicatessens), and reconstitute well after being soaked in warm water. Dried ceps can also be ground into powder and used as flavouring.

Most *Boletus* species are mild and nutty to taste, and they are amongst the most popular edible fungi in mainland Europe. There are a large number of boletes growing in the British Isles, and all of them have the same foam-like gill structure. A few are indigestible or can cause bad gastric upsets. Luckily all of these are coloured red or purple on pores or stem, and so are easily avoided. None of the edible species described below have this feature.

## Beetroot and cep soup

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This is an attractive old Polish recipe for a soup which is served on Christmas Eve. Make some clear beetroot stock by boiling chopped raw beetroots in water, with bay leaves and peppercorns. Take your sliced ceps and fry in butter with chopped onion and paprika pepper for about five minutes. Take some ravioli-shaped pasta cases and fill with the cep and onion mixture, minced fine. Seal the cases, and bake in the oven until golden brown. Reheat the beetroot stock, and sharpen to taste with a little vinegar and lemon juice. At the last minute add the hot cases and serve.



## Bay Bolete

*Boletus badius*

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Quite common in woodland on acid soils, favouring Scots pine. August to November. Similar to *Boletus edulis*. Cap 7–15 cm (3–6 inches) across, chestnut to chocolate-brown, felt-like when dry but slightly clammy when wet. Pores pale yellow to yellow-green. Stem yellow-brown, stout and often curved and striated. Flesh white to pale yellow, stains pale blue when cut. (Opposite, top left.)

## Yellow-cracked Bolete

*Boletus subtomentosus*

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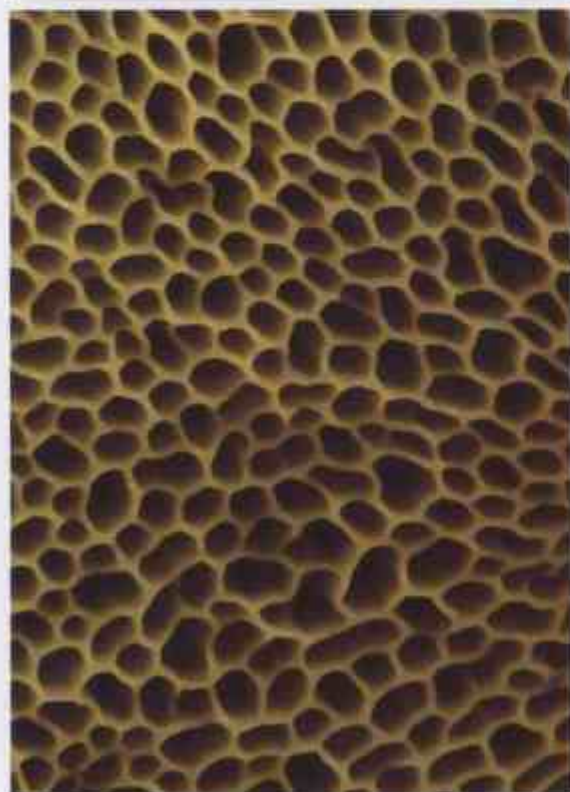
Found in all sorts of wood, especially in moss and on grassy paths, June to October. Cap 5–7 cm (2–3 inches) across, colour variable, olive-yellow to brown; when old the surface is often cracked. Pores bright yellow. Stem yellow-brown, ribbed, tapering towards the base. Flesh soft, yellowish-white, pleasant smelling. (Opposite, top right.)

## Red-cracked Bolete

*Boletus cbrycenteron*

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A common woodland species. Cap colour is variable, usually yellow-brown with a pink layer beneath. Pores yellow to olive, bruising blue. Stem yellow with a reddish tinge. Edible but soggy and can be prone to infestation by maggots. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)





## Devil's Bolete

 POISONOUS

*Boletus satanas*

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Rare and local, under broad-leaved trees in the south of England. Cap large, 8–25 cm (3–10 inches) across, almost hemispherical and entirely white, turning greyish with age. Pores tiny, first yellow then red; bruise blue-green. Stem swollen and covered with red veining. Flesh yellow, very unpleasant smell. Very indigestible, and can cause severe gastric complaints in some people. (Opposite)

*Boletus erythropus*

---

Common in woodland clearings on acid soils. Cap large, up to 20 cm (8 inches) across, chestnut to liver-brown in colour. Pores small, round, deep orange-red, blue when bruised. Stem thick and yellow, covered with red spotting. Flesh yellowish, turning intense blue when cut or broken. Little smell or taste. An edible fungus, but probably best avoided because of the possibility of misidentification of *B. satanas*. Other edible species that can be similarly confused are *B. luridus*, *B. queletii* and *B. rhodopurpureus*.

*Gyroporus cyanescens*

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Rare in woods on poor soil, especially spruce, July to December. Cap 4–10 cm (1½–4 inches) across, rough, pale ochre in colour. Pores white to pale yellow. Stem stout, velvety, pale ochre. The flesh is white but turns deep blue immediately after cutting.





## Slippery Jack

*Suillus luteus*

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Quite common amongst grass in conifer woods, September to November. Cap 6–12 cm (2–5 inches) across, orange-brown, tinged with purple, and slimy to the touch. Pores white to pale yellow. Stem yellow, with a floppy, brownish-purple ring. Flesh yellow, unchanging when cut. Peel before cooking. Will not keep and therefore unsuitable for drying. (Above and opposite.)

*Suillus granulatus*

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Quite common in conifer woods, June to October. Cap 5–8 cm (2–3 inches) across, slimy, straw-yellow to leather-brown. Peels easily. Pores yellow to olive, and when young exudes milky drops. Stem slender, light yellow, granular, no ring. Flesh yellowish, unchanging when cut, fruity to smell. Very susceptible to maggots.



## Orange Birch Bolete

*Leccinum versipelle*

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Found under birches and conifers, July to November. Cap 8–18 cm (3–7 inches) across, orange-yellow to yellow-brown. Pores minute, dirty grey. Stem sturdy and tapering towards the cap, slate-coloured, scurfy. Flesh white, very slowly turning dirty pink on cutting. Don't be alarmed by the fact that the flesh turns black on cooking. (Opposite, top left and opposite, top right.)

## Larch Bolete

*Suillus grevillei*

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Quite common, in larch woods only, June to November. Cap 4–12 cm (1½–5 inches) across, slimy, pale yellow. Pores sulphur yellow, bruise brown. Stem tall, yellowish-brown, with a pale ring which soon disappears. Flesh has the colour and texture of rhubarb and stains pale lilac on cutting. Remove skin and tubes before cooking. (Opposite, bottom left.)

## Brown Birch Bolete

*Leccinum scabrum*

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Found in grass under birches, July to November. Cap 5–10 cm (2–4 inches) across, smooth and greyish-brown, dry, but sticky in wet weather. Gills white to dirty fawn. Stem tall, white, flecked with brown or black scales. Flesh soft, soon becoming moist and spongy. Usually fairly free of maggots. (Opposite, bottom right.)





## *Russula* species

There are over 100 species of *Russula* in Britain. With their brightly coloured caps, they are amongst the most attractive of our native fungi and many (with some exceptions – see below) are good to eat. Often specific to a particular species of tree, *Russulas* are characterised by crumbly flesh.

The *Russulas* are a difficult family, with many species, enormously variable in colouring, and yet too good to omit altogether. Their variability can lead almost any specimen, at some stage in its development, to become one of those vague white-gilled, yellowish, greenish or brownish-capped fungi which are so difficult to tell from the main poisonous species. In fact, none of the *Russulas* themselves are poisonous when cooked – though there are three common species that are poisonous when raw.

## Bare-toothed *Russula*

### *Russula vesca*

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*Russula vesca* is probably the easiest of the common species to identify. It grows in all sorts of woods, especially oak and beech, from June to November. The cap is 5–10 cm (2–4 inches) across, and can be coloured anything from pale pink to violet or rusty red. Stem and gills are pure white, and there is no ring or sheath. The best identifying feature is the fact that, when the fungus is mature, one or two millimetres of the margin of the cap are free from skin, and finely grooved with radial veins.

Cooked like a *Boletus*, *Russula vesca* is an excellent fungus, firmer than most, and with a mildly nutty taste which has been likened to new potatoes.



## Yellow Swamp Russula

*Russula claroflava*

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Common under birch and alder, June to November. Cap 5–12 cm (2–5 inches) across, matt yellow at first, becoming shiny. Gills ochre, stem white, bruising greyish. One of the best of the *Russulas*, with a fruity smell and a mild taste. (Opposite)

## Green-cracking Russula

*Russula virescens*

---

Occasional in open broad-leaved woodland, especially oak and beech. Cap 4–12 cm (1½–5 inches) across, cream, turning patchy green with age. Gills and flesh creamy-white. This is often regarded as the best edible *Russula*. Do watch out for maggots.

*Russula krombolzii*

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Previously known as *R. atropurpurea*. Common throughout Britain, especially under oak, June to December. Cap 3–10 cm (1–4 inches) across, a striking deep purple in colour with a darker centre. Gills, stem and flesh dull white, smelling slightly of apples.

*Russula xerampelina*

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Found under pines. Cap up to 15 cm (6 inches) across, with no depression, blackish-purple in the centre fading to carmine at edge. Gills ochre, flesh yellowing when cut.



## Charcoal Burner

*Russula cyanoxantha*

---

Found under broad-leaved trees throughout Britain. Cap 5–15 cm (2–6 inches) across, a mixture of colours ranging from greenish-blue to violet. Gills soft and white. Stem and flesh white, with little or no smell. (Opposite, top left.)

*Russula rosea*

---

Found under broad-leaved trees, especially beech. Cap 8–12 cm (3–5 inches) across, slightly depressed in the centre, a delicate pink fading towards the centre. Gills and flesh white, with no distinctive smell or taste. (Opposite, top right.)

## The Sickener

 POISONOUS

*Russula emetica*

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Common under pine or birch. Cap 5–10 cm (2–4 inches) across, shiny bright cherry-red or vermillion. Gills and flesh white, with a fruity smell. Poisonous when raw and best avoided altogether.

*Russula aeruginea*

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Quite common under birch and conifers. Cap 8–12 cm (3–5 inches) across, with no central depression, greenish-grey in colour. Gills forked and yellowish. Stem white, yellowing slightly with age. Can cause stomach upsets, and best avoided.

## Beechwood Sickener

*Russula mairei*

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Similar to the sickener but grows under beeches. Cap 3–7 cm (1–3 inches) across, matt cherry-red or vermillion. Gills white with a grey-green tint. Stem white, yellowing at the base. Smells of coconut. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)





## Saffron Milk Cap

*Lactarius deliciosus*

Occurs in pine woods, provided the soil is not too acid, September to November. Funnel-shaped, with a short orange stem and a cap 5–15 cm (2–6 inches) across, orange-red, with darker banding and a depression in the centre. Gills bright orange, crowded. The whole fungus exudes beads of orange milk, which turns green and stains older specimens.

The best of the edible milk caps, as suggested by its Latin name. A popular fungus in parts of Europe, but too rich (and occasionally bitter) for some tastes. The bitterness can be removed by blanching. Once dried, the mushroom can be fried or grilled—the latter is recommended, as it makes the most of the crisp texture. It goes well with fish, and its eye-catching colour make it an attractive addition to any dish. The saffron milk cap can be confused with two poisonous relatives:



## Woolly Milk Cap

*Lactarius torminosus*

 POISONOUS

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Found with birch, the stem, gills and cap are flesh-pink. The cap does feature darker rings, but the cap has a woolly appearance, and the milk is white. (Above)

*Lactarius helvus*

 POISONOUS

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Also found with pine, but distinguished by a lack of bands on the yellow-brown cap, with stem and gills the same colour, and a water-like milk. Smells of fenugreek.



## Giant Puffball

*Calvatia gigantea*

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Meadows, pastures, sometimes under hedges, July to November. A large and roughly spherical fungus, usually 10–30 cm (4–12 inches) across, white, smooth and leathery initially. Flesh solid, spongy, and pure white when young, turning to yellow and dirty green when old. Grows apparently straight from the ground, with little or no stalk.

To come upon one of these suddenly is a memorable experience, only rivalled by the taste of the first mouthful. There is not much point in searching deliberately for them; they are always unexpected, glinting like huge displaced eggs under a hedge or in the corner of a field. It always seems sad to butcher the soft, kid-leather skin, but when you do cut through the flesh, the great flaky slabs of white meat that fall away are just as inviting.

Giant puffballs can grow to a prodigious size. Some have been found over 1 metre (4 ft) in diameter. The usual size is more like a small football, but even this will provide a feast for a large number of people, for every part of the fungus is solid, edible flesh. The important quality to look out for is that this flesh is still pure white. As it ages, puffball flesh turns yellow and then pale brown, becoming progressively less appetising and increasingly indigestible. It finally dissolves into a dust which consists of the reproductive spores. The giant puffball is one of the most fecund of all living organisms, and a single specimen may produce up to seven billion spores. If all of these germinated successfully and produced similar specimens with equally successful spores, their grandchildren would form a mass eight hundred times the volume of the earth.

There is no real need to peel puffballs, though the skin may be too leathery for some tastes. Simply clean them, and slice into 2½ cm (1 inch) steaks for frying, grilling or baking. The slices taken from the smoother, more rubbery flesh near the top of the fungus are like sweetbreads; the more crumbly steaks from near the base are softer and less succulent, a little like an omelette or toasted marshmallow.

Even with small specimens you are likely to be left with some perfectly good surplus flesh, and some collectors have experimented with deep-freezing this. The slices can be frozen fresh, but tend to become rather soggy on thawing. Better results are obtained by coating them in egg and breadcrumbs, frying them, and then freezing. Perhaps the answer is not to pick the whole puffball at once, but to follow the practice recommended by one Victorian writer: 'We have known specimens to grow amongst cabbages in a kitchen garden, and when such is the case it may be left standing, slices being cut off as required until the whole is consumed.'

## Stuffed puffball

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Hollow out the puffball until there is a shell about 2.5 cm (1 inch) thick remaining. Fill it with a mixture of mince, herbs, rice and the crumbled-up hollowings. Wrap with bacon and foil and bake in a medium oven for about one hour. The very heavy aroma during cooking may put some people off, but the ball resembles a roast turkey when it emerges from the oven.

## Fried puffball steaks

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1 medium-sized  
giant puffball

50 g (2 oz) seasoned  
flour

1 egg

Water

1 cupful breadcrumbs

8 rashers of bacon  
(optional)

Butter or vegetable oil  
(if not using bacon)

- Wipe the puffball clean, and cut into slices about 1 cm (½ inch) thick, checking that they are clear of any yellowish tinge.
- Make a batter by beating the flour and egg together until smooth, then slowly adding water until the mixture is the consistency of single cream.
- Dip each side of the puffball steaks into the batter, then into the breadcrumbs spread into a shallow dish. Toasting the breadcrumbs beforehand makes a crunchy alternative.
- Leave the battered, crumbed steaks to one side for a few minutes while you fry the bacon.
- Remove the bacon from the pan, and fry the puffball slices in the fat (or in vegetable oil or butter).
- Serve with the bacon, if using.







There are a number of different species of puffball growing in the British Isles, all resembling more or less miniature versions of the giant puffball. All are edible when young and white-fleshed, though they tend to be rubbery in texture and lack the exquisite taste of the giant species. But there is a species of a related family, the common earthball (*Scleroderma citrinum*) which can cause gastric upsets if eaten in quantity. This resembles a puffball in shape, but its surface is hard, brown and scaly. So it is as well to pick only those puffballs which are white or creamy, and relatively smooth-skinned. It is usual to peel these smaller balls, as the skin can be tougher than the giant puffball's. This, together with the cutting of the base, will tell you if the flesh is white inside. These smaller balls can be cooked like *Calvatia gigantea*, or stewed whole in milk. The commonest species is the common puffball.

## Common Puffball

*Lycoperdon perlatum*

---

Pastures, heaths and sometimes woods, June to November. 2–7 cm (1–3 inches) across, more pear-shaped than spherical, skin white to cream when young, usually covered with tiny, spiny pimples. (Opposite, top left and opposite, top right.)

*Calvatia utriformis*

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Lawns, pastures and sand dunes. About 3–7 cm (1–3 inches) across, with no stipe. Entirely white or cream in colour, with a slightly mealy surface. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)

## Jew's Ear

*Auricularia auricula-judae*

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Quite common on elder trees throughout the year, especially October and November. An ear-shaped bracket fungus, 2–7 cm (1–3 inches) across, usually growing in clusters.

Red-brown in colour, and gelatinous and soft when young. Upper surface more velvety and brown, underside more pink. I can imagine no food more forbidding in appearance than the Jew's ear fungus. It hangs in folds from decaying elder branches like slices off some ageing kidney, clammy and jelly-like to the touch. It is no fungus to leave around the house if you have sensitive relatives, or even to forget about in your own pocket.

But it is a good edible species for all that, and is much prized in China, where a related species is grown for food on oak palings. It was also valued by the old herbalists (as *fungus sambuci*) as a poultice for inflamed eyes, though apparently not sufficiently to warrant a more complimentary name. Anti-Semitism in the Middle Ages meant that 'Jew's meat' was a deprecatory term for all fungi, though the name of this species may contain an oblique reference to Judas, who reputedly hanged himself from an elder tree.

Jew's ear should be gathered whilst it is still soft and moist (it turns rock-hard with age) and cut from the tree with a knife. Discard all of the tough stalk, wash it well, and slice it finely, for although the translucent flesh is thin it can be tough and indigestible. Stew for a good three-quarters of an hour in stock or milk, and serve with plenty of pepper. The result is crisp and not unlike a seaweed. It can be dried, and is best ground to a powder and used as a flavouring.

### Chinese-style Auricularia soup

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An unusual sweet soup is made with the very similar cloud ear fungus (*Auricularia polytricha*) in China, and the recipe is equally suitable for the Jew's ear fungus. Clean and soak 25 g (1 oz) of the fungus and chop roughly. Heat 800 g (2 lb) of brown sugar crystals in 500 ml (1 pint) of water until the sugar melts and the mixture is almost boiling. Drain the ears, add to the syrup and steam for 1½ hours. Serve hot or cold.







# Lichens and Ferns

## Iceland Moss

*Cetraria islandica*

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This rust-brown lichen grows amongst the heather and other ground plants on moorlands in Scotland and the north of England. (Opposite, top left.)

An edible jelly is sometimes made by boiling the plant, which is first soaked in water to remove the bitter flavour.

## Rock Tripe

*Umbilicaria pustulata*

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This is a strange lichen, growing like a mat of pebbles on rocks and walls in western regions of Britain. (Opposite, top right.)

It is edible if cooked like a seaweed, and some arctic explorers have survived off it for weeks on end. Yet they have more praise for its powers of nourishment than for its taste; one gives the rather forbidding description, 'a little like tapioca with a slight flavouring of liquorice'.

## Maidenhair Fern

*Adiantum capillus-veneris*

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A rare and delicate fern which grows on sheltered limestone cliffs in a few localities in the west. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries maidenhair fern was used as a garnish to sweet dishes. Later it formed the basis of *capillaire*, which was a popular flavouring in the late nineteenth century. The fern (imported from Iceland) was simmered in water for several hours, and the liquid made into a thick syrup with sugar and orange-water. *Capillaire* was mixed with fruit juice and water to form soft drinks.









## Seaweeds

## Seaweeds

---

Although they reproduce by spores, not flowers and seeds, seaweeds have seasons of growth like other plants. They produce shoots in the spring, grow quickly and luxuriantly during the summer, and wither in the winter. The best months to gather most seaweeds are May and June.

Seaweeds obtain their food entirely from the surrounding sea water and do not have roots in the conventional sense. However, they do have hold-fasts, by which they attach themselves to rocks and stones, and from which the stem-like part, or stipe, grows. The weed itself can regenerate from a cut stipe, provided the cut is not too near the hold-fast. So if you are cutting seaweed rather than gathering leaves which have been washed free of their moorings, leave plenty of stipe so that the weed can grow again.

### Some cooking hints

There are a number of basic ways of dealing with all seaweeds:

- Before eating any seaweed always wash thoroughly in fresh water to remove sand, shells and other shoreline debris which may have stuck to it.
- Slice them very thin and serve raw as a salad. A Chinese-style dressing of soy sauce, vinegar and a little sugar is a good accompaniment.
- Slice them a little less thinly, and stir-fry in sesame or sunflower oil for about 5 minutes, or in more oil at a higher temperature, until they are crisp on the outside.
- Add larger pieces to soups and stews to thicken them. Most seaweeds contain alginates, a kind of vegetable gelatine, which are released during prolonged cooking. Seaweeds are low in calories but rich in minerals, particularly iodides, and you may take a little while to get used to their flavours. But do give them a fair chance: they are intriguing foods and undeserving of their somewhat freakish reputation.





## Sea Lettuce

*Ulva lactuca*

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Quite common on all types of shore, at all tidal levels, especially in places where water runs into the sea. Broad, tough, crumpled green fronds, 10–30 cm (4–12 inches) across, attached to stones and rocks.

One of the more pleasant seaweeds served raw, especially chopped, and served Japanese-style with soy sauce and rice vinegar.



## Dabberlocks

*Alaria esculenta*

---

Commonest on exposed shores of Atlantic and North Sea coasts, where it takes the place of *Laminaria digitata* (overleaf). Short stem, narrow, slightly wavy blade 0.5–3 m (15–10 ft) long. Fronds may appear feathery. Yellowish-olive to reddish-brown.

## Gutweed

*Enteromorpha intestinalis*

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Abundant on salt marshes and in dikes and rocky pools. Inflated green tube, irregularly constricted, up to 75 cm (30 inches) long. (Opposite, top left.)

A weed which should be picked in the early spring, and stir-fried until crisp.

## Kelp – Oarweed, Tangle

*Laminaria digitata*

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Grows at and just below the low-water mark on rocky shores all round the coast, often forming extensive 'meadows' at low water. Also found attached to small stones on muddy and sandy flats. Blade up to 2 m (6 ft) long, splits into fingers as it matures. (Opposite, top right.)

The young stipes of this weed used to be sold in Scotland under the name of 'tangle'. One writer describes their taste as resembling that of peanuts. A composite jelly, made from this weed and dulse and called *pain des algues*, used to be prepared in the west of France.

## Kelp – Sea Belt, Poor-man's Weather-glass

*Laminaria saccharina*

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Another common kelp, found at the low-water mark on rocky shores all around the coast. A short slender stem and a ribbon-like blade, up to 4 m (13 ft) long, with crinkled edges. (Opposite, bottom left and opposite, bottom right.)

As well as a salad vegetable, this kelp is used as a source of alginates.









## Bladder Wrack, Popweed

*Fucus vesiculosus*

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Abundant on the middle shore, into estuaries, and unmistakable for its inflated bladders. Frond up to 1 m (3 ft) long, characterised by prominent midrib and gas bladders.

Dark olive-brown. This common seaweed can be washed, simmered in a little water and served as a green vegetable.

## Dulse

*Palmaria palmata*

---

Abundant on stones on the middle and lower shores, on the North Sea and northern Atlantic coasts. A tough, flat frond 10–30 cm (4–12 inches) long. Dark red, but can look purple under water. (Opposite)

Dulse has been eaten raw as a salad, and in New England the dried fronds are used as a relish. It is also occasionally grazed by sheep and cattle. It is very tough, and as a cooked vegetable needs up to five hours' simmering.

## Pepper Dulse

*Laurencia pinnatifida*

---

An infrequent weed which forms dense tufts in rock crevices on the middle shore. Flattened fronds, 7–20 cm (3–8 inches), with alternate branches dividing into smaller branchlets. Brownish-purple.

Pepper dulse is very pungent and is usually used as a condiment. In Iceland it has been employed as a substitute for chewing tobacco.





# Purple Laver

*Porphyra umbilicalis*

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Common all round Britain, especially on exposed shores on the west coast. Grows on rock and stones at most levels of the beach, especially where the stones are likely to be covered with sand. The fronds are thin, irregularly shaped membranes, 20 cm (8 inches) across, greenish when young, becoming purplish-red.

In the southwest of Wales laver is considered a great delicacy, and it sells briskly in many food shops to those who don't want the bother of gathering it for themselves.

Yet it is one of the easier seaweeds to find and recognise, its translucent purple fronds liable to crop up on almost all levels of the shore. In Asia *Porphyra* species are cultivated, and they are best known by the Japanese name *nori*. Bundles of bamboo are placed on the sea bottom, just offshore, and transferred to fresh river water once the weed has established itself. In these conditions the plant apparently grows softer and more extensive fronds. In Japan, China and Korea, *nori* is widely used, in soups and stews, as a covering round rice balls, and in pickles and preserves.

In Britain there have been two classic traditional uses: laverbread, and laver sauce for mutton.

## Laverbread

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The first stage in any laver recipe is to reduce the weed to a sort of rough purée. First wash it well and then simmer in a little water until it is like well-cooked spinach. This is best done in a double saucepan as the laver sticks easily. This mush, if transferred to a jar, will keep well for several days. It is this purée which is sold in Wales under the name of laverbread. It ends up in the place you would least expect it – on the breakfast table, rolled in oatmeal and fried in bacon fat.

## Laver sauce

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Beat up two cupfuls of the laver purée with 25 g (1 oz) of butter and the juice of one Seville orange.

## Carrageen, Irish Moss

*Chondrus crispus*

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Widespread on stones and rocks on temperate Atlantic shores. Grows in clusters of purple-brown fronds, usually 5–15 cm (2–6 inches) in length. These have a distinctly flat stalk, and branch repeatedly into a rough fan shape. (Opposite)

Carrageen is an important source of alginates – vegetable gelatines – which are used for thickening soups, emulsifying ice-creams and setting jellies. They can also be made into thin durable films for use as edible sausage skins.

You can find carrageen on almost any western or southern shore. It is best gathered young, in April or May, and either used immediately or carefully dried. To use the weed fresh, wash it well, add one cup of weed to three cups of milk or water, and add sugar and flavouring to taste. Then simmer slowly until most of the weed has dissolved. Remove any undissolved fragments and pour into a mould to set. This produces a basic carrageen blancmange or jelly, depending on whether you use milk or water. Ginger is good as a flavouring, and can be added in the form of the chopped root, or as ground powder, during the simmering of the weed.

To dry the weed, wash it well, and then lay it out to dry on a wind-free surface out of doors. Wash it from time to time with fresh water, or simply leave it in the rain. After a while it will become bleached to a creamy-white colour. Trim off any tough stalks, dry thoroughly indoors, and then store in bags. The dried weed can be used exactly as if it were fresh.

*Gigartina stellata*

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Common and often abundant on the middle and lower shore, especially on the west coast. Can be used to make a jelly base.









## Shellfish

## Shellfish

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It is believed that many of the more bloodcurdling superstitions associated with the mandrake – in particular its power to flee from prospective pickers on leg-like roots, or kill them off with its notorious shriek – were invented by professional Greek herb pickers, who were anxious to keep amateurs away from their livelihood. The same is probably true of many of the stories concerning the poisonousness of shellfish out of season. Shellfish are one of the lifelines by which coastal dwellers hang on to a measure of independence round the year. Yet they are also one of the most tempting of wild foods that are there just for the picking. Unhappily for the professionals, the next generation of pickings is being spawned just when the holidaymakers are trooping out to the mudflats with their buckets and spades. No wonder, then, that the gentle warnings of superstition, the one sort of ‘keep out’ notice permissible on public land, are propped up rather more than they would be by facts alone.

In fact every sort of fish is slightly out of condition during the breeding season, but none need be poisonous, not even shellfish. This is not to say that there are no good reasons for leaving shellfish alone during the summer months. Molluscs are highly susceptible to disease and temperature change, and unless the largest possible numbers are allowed to spawn freely, their survival rate will be low.

And ironically, the way we are currently treating our coastal waters may yet turn the story into sound advice. Bivalve molluscs (with shells in two hinged halves like castanets) feed by pumping water through their shells and filtering out the food particles. In doing this they may also filter out sewage particles and the enteric bacteria which are associated with them. During the warm weather which corresponds to the off-season these bacteria can multiply alarmingly, up to a level which can cause food poisoning in humans. Unfortunately this is particularly true of large bivalves like mussels and oysters, which filter a great deal of water each day, and sometimes seem to relish the warm, soupy conditions near sewage outlets.

So shellfish should be approached with caution, but not with trepidation, and with the knowledge that it is not some sinister springtime sap that makes them chancy during the warm months, but our own disgusting habits.

## Rules

**If you keep to these few rules, you will never need a stomach pump.**

- 1 Never gather shellfish close to human dwellings, or anywhere where sewage or refuse is pumped into the sea.
- 2 Always wash them well, outside and in, in clean water.
- 3 Check that all your specimens are alive immediately before cooking them. Shellfish decompose very quickly after death, and a dead mollusc is more dangerous than a dirty one. To tell if a bivalve shellfish is alive, gently force its shell open a fraction of an inch. It should shut again quickly as soon as you take off the pressure. If it is already open, opens wide with ease, or fails to shut again, it is safer to assume that it is dead.

## Common Limpet

*Patella vulgata*

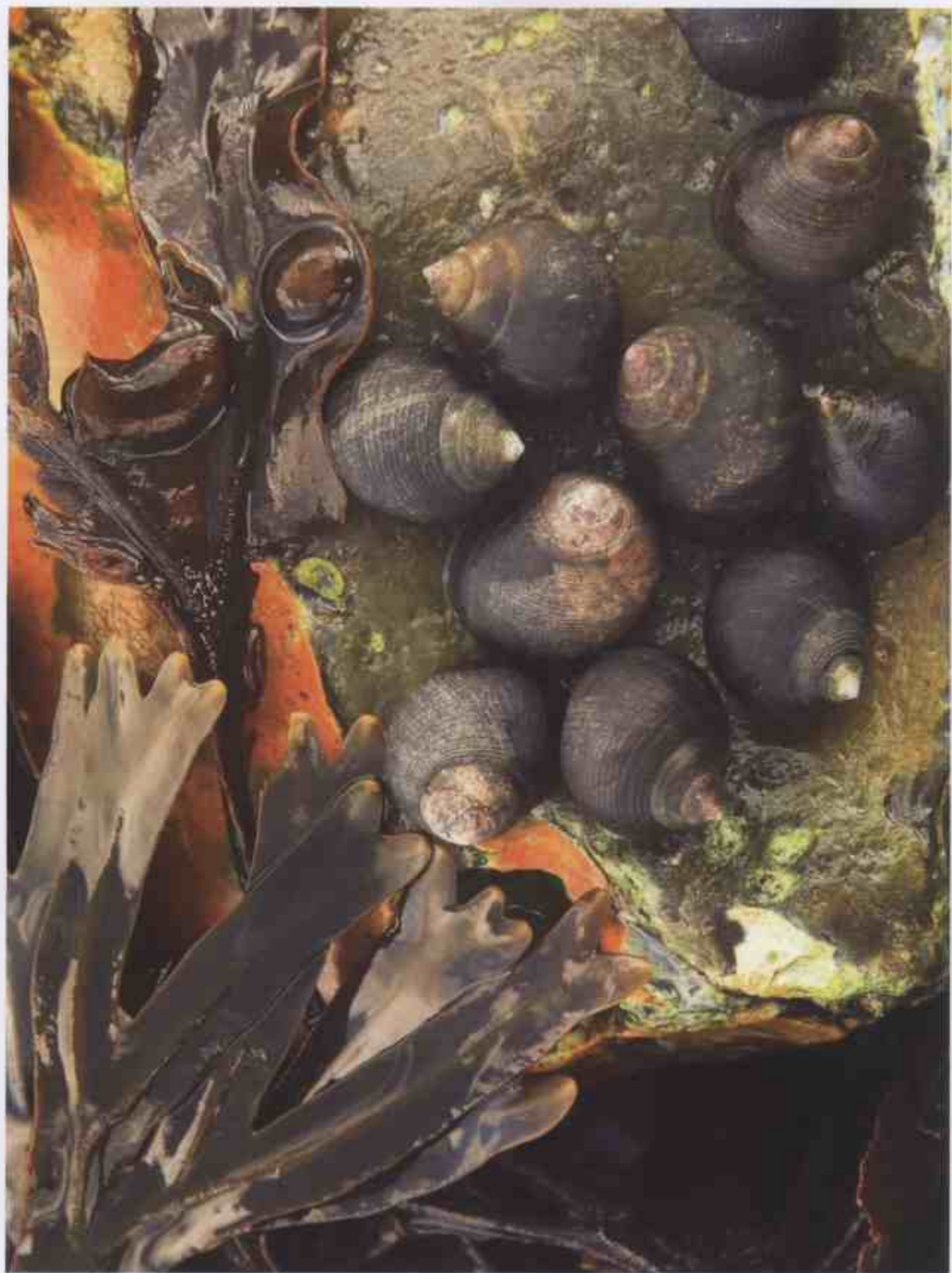
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**Common on rocky shores round all British coasts. Limpets are shaped like flat cones and cling to rocks. Shell up to 6 cm (2½ inches) across.**

Limpets graze on algae when the tide is in, returning to their individual resting places as the tide recedes. The common limpet can grow quite large, but it is normally somewhat smaller, and consequently a fair number – and a fair degree of scrambling – are needed to gather enough for a meal. Do not pick them from piers or jetties, but from out-of-town rocks that are covered daily by the tide. They can be prised from the rocks with a knife.

Soak them and then boil them, like cockles, until the meat floats free of the shell. Be warned, though: limpets can be very tough, and they may need considerable further simmering or baking. In the Isle of Man limpets used to be fried at Easter.





## Common Periwinkle, Winkle

*Littorina littorea*

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Widely distributed round all British coasts. Common on rocks and weeds on the middle shore. A sharply pointed shell, 1–2.5 cm (½–1 inch) high, spiralled like a tiny whelk, and normally dark grey in colour.

You will not need to spend very long unravelling a bowl of winkles from their tortuous shells before you appreciate why the process produced a new verb of extrication for the English language.

Judged purely as food, winkles do not have much to commend them. They have none of the rich flavour of mussels or the muscular texture of whelks. You need a dozen to provide a single mouthful. The joy of winkle eating lies wholly in the challenge of getting the things out of their shells, and, for the experienced, in the leisurely ritual of the pin and the twist. In *Food in England*, Dorothy Hartley describes a delightful encounter with a connoisseur: 'I learnt "winkles" from a night watchman. He used to sit by his big red coke fire-bucket, a bit of folded blanket over his knees, his mug of hot tea, and a little enamel bowl full of winkles. And he would turn up the little tab-end at the bottom of his waistcoat, pull out a long pin, and take a winkle ... And then he would chuck the empty shell neatly over his shoulder into the canal with a tiny "plop". He did it quite slowly, and he always paused (I can see him now, red in the fire-light, head aslant, his huge hand still half-open, curved like a hoary brown shell). He always paused just that second till he heard the tiny plop, before he bent and picked up the next winkle. His old woman had put him "a reet proper breakfast", and he had a basket with a bottle in it. But, as he said, 'Winkles, they do pass the time along very pleasantly.'"

You can find winkles on almost every stretch of rocky or weedy shore between high and low tide-marks. They are often in quite large colonies, and can be easily gathered. To clean the sand and grit out from them thoroughly, soak them in fresh water for about twelve hours. Then cook them by plunging them into boiling water and simmering for about ten minutes.

Then eat them like the night watchman, leisurely, with a long pin, and perhaps a little salt and vinegar at the side. The whole fish is edible, except for the tiny mica-like plate at the mouth of the shell, which should be removed with your pin before you winkle out the flesh.



## Common Mussel, Blue Mussel

*Mytilus edulis*

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Found on all coasts on rocks from the middle shore down. The edible mussel is up to 10 cm (4 inches) long and has a blue-black shell with a pearly, whitish lining.

Mussels are amongst our commonest and most delectable shellfish. But they are also responsible for most cases of shellfish poisoning. If you follow the rules given on p. 427 you are unlikely to eat a bad mussel. Gather them from clean stony shores at low tide outside the summer months, let them stand through at least two changes of fresh tap-water, and check that each one is still alive before cooking.

If you only have a few, try baking them in their shells in hot ash, and popping in a mixture of butter, garlic and parsley as the shells open.







## Scallop

*Pecten maximus*

---

The scallop has a reddish-brown shell with characteristic ribs, and may measure up to 15 cm (6 inches) across.

This is the classic shell that came to be the oil company's symbol. You find them occasionally on the lower shore, on that strip of sand that is only uncovered during very low tides.

Like clams, scallops need careful cooking. After washing and scalding, cut away the white and orange flesh, dust with flour or breadcrumbs and fry for about five minutes. They have a superbly fleshy, almost poultry-like flavour.



## Oyster

*Ostrea edulis*

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The oyster shell is smooth and white to begin with, but as it ages it becomes grey and scaly. It, too, may measure as much as 15 cm (6 inches) across.

Oysters have not always been the expensive delicacy that they are now. For centuries they were one of the great staples of the working-class diet. In the latter half of the nineteenth century prices suddenly rocketed, and there is little doubt that the cause was the irresponsible over-harvesting of the beds to meet the demands of expanding townships.

Today you will be lucky to find many wild oysters. The ones that still remain round our coasts are mostly under cultivation in private beds. So if you should chance upon one, clinging to a rock in some estuary or creek, best leave it where it is. But if eat it you must, there is only one way: raw, with lemon and Tabasco sauce.

## Cockle

*Cerastoderma edule*

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Widely distributed round all coasts. Common in sand or sandy mud on the middle shore. A rather dumpy, globular shell up to 6 cm (2 ½ inches) across. The two halves are heavily ribbed and are pale brown to grey-blue in colour.

Just after the tide has gone out over the vast salt marshes on the north Norfolk coast, you will sometimes see a cluster of enormous slate-coloured cockles strewn across the muddy sand like dice. These are the famous 'Stiffkey blues', the best and fattest cockles of all.

To find any cockles, big or small, as conspicuously displayed as this is a rare piece of luck. More often they are 2–8 centimetres under the surface. There is no simple rule about where they can be found between the tidelines.



A vein of mud in the sand is a good sign; so is a green film of plankton over the surface. But the only sure test is to scratch about and see if they are there. Hands will do if you only want a few, but a rake with blunted points is the best way of pulling them out of the sand quickly. Gather them into a bucket or bag. Do not throw them: the shells break easily, and a broken cockle is very quickly a dead one. Don't pick any specimen less than 2 cm across either. It's scarcely worth the bother. And cockles, like all shellfish, wage a constant battle for survival against pollution and overpicking. If the young are taken before they have had a chance to spawn then the battle is bound to be a losing one. Many stretches of coast have experienced shellfish droughts recently, and though there is probably no single explanation, the over-picking of immature shells is certainly a contributing factor.

When you have all the cockles you want, take them home and wash off the superficial mud and sand. Let them rinse themselves through in a bucket of clean, fresh water for at least six hours, and preferably overnight. Then drop them into a saucepan of boiling water, checking each one for signs of life immediately before. They will quickly open, and be thoroughly cooked within five minutes. The results can be made into soups or pies, or eaten plain as soon as they have been strained from the water. Try experimenting with sauces to go with the freshly cooked fish. A friend of mine once concocted one out of yoghurt, mustard and horse-radish, and it made a wonderfully tart, silky foil to the springy flesh of the cockles. One eighteenth-century cookery book recommends that the cooked fish should be stuffed into slits in marsh lamb, as if the meat were larded with them.

## Cockles and bacon

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Cook the bacon very crisp first, then remove it from the pan and fry the cockles in its fat. Serve them together on toast with plenty of pepper.

## Clam, Sand Gaper

*Mya arenaria*

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Widely distributed. Common in sand and sandy mud on the middle and lower shore. An oval shell not unlike a large mussel in shape, up to 12.5 cm (5 inches) across, coloured grey or brownish.

These large mussel-like shells have protruding trunks, which are siphons through which the shellfish feed whilst they are buried. The siphons can be extended up to 30 cm (1 foot) in length.

Gather them into a bucket, but do not pick any small specimens. Clams are big enough to need substantially more cooking than most shellfish. As with cockles, let them rinse themselves through in a bucket of clean, fresh water for at least six hours, and preferably overnight. Then scald them in boiling water for about ten minutes and remove them from their shells. The siphon is usually trimmed off, and the remaining meat fried or baked for a further half an hour, or simply boiled until tender and served with a sauce.

### Clam chowder

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Simmer together chopped clams, fried pieces of pork, onion and potato, with milk added as the soup comes off the boil.







Scots Pine p.30  
*Pinus sylvestris*



Juniper p.33  
*Juniperus communis*



Barberry p.34  
*Berberis vulgaris*



Hop p.37  
*Humulus lupulus*



Walnut p.38  
*Juglans regia*



Beech p.41  
*Fagus sylvatica*



Oak p.51  
*Quercus robur/Quercus petraea*



Sweet Chestnut p.44  
*Castanea sativa*



Hazel p.52  
*Corylus avellana*



Lime p.57  
*Tilia cordata*



Sloe, Blackthorn p.58  
*Prunus spinosa*



Bullace, Damsons and Wild Plums p.62  
*Prunus* species



Wild Cherry p.61  
*Prunus avium*



Crab Apple p.64  
*Malus sylvestris*



Wild Service-tree p.71  
*Sorbus torminalis*



Rowan, Mountain-ash p.68  
*Sorbus aucuparia*



Juneberry p.73  
*Amelanchier lamareckii*



Whitebeam p.72  
*Sorbus aria*



Hawthorn, May-tree p.77  
*Crataegus monogyna*



Medlar p.74  
*Eriobotrya germanica*



Elder p.78  
*Sambucus nigra*



Oregon-grape p.85  
*Malinia aquifolium*



Common Poppy,  
Field Poppy p.88  
*Papaver rhoeas*



Stinging Nettle p.93  
*Urtica dioica*



Bog-myrtle, Sweet Gale p.97  
*Myrica gale*



Hottentot-fig p.98  
*Carpobrotus edulis*



Fat-hen p.100  
*Chenopodium album*



Good-King-Henry p.103  
*Chenopodium bonus-henricus*



Common Orache p.104  
*Atriplex patula*



Sea-purslane p.104  
*Atriplex portulacastris*



Sea Beet,  
Wild Spinach p.106  
*Beta vulgaris ssp. maritima*

Marsh Samphire,  
Glasswort p.108  
*Salsola species*



Pigweed, Common  
Amaranth p.112  
*Amaranthus retroflexus*



Spear-leaved Orache p.104  
*Atriplex pycnantha*



Chickweed p.112  
*Stellaria media*



Bladder  
Campion p.116  
*Silene vulgaris*



Bistort p.118  
*Pterisantha historta*



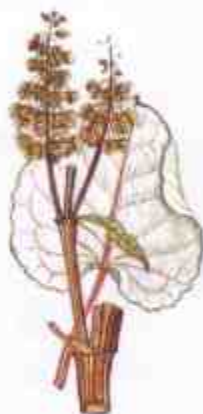
Redshank p.121  
*Pterisantha maculosa*



Common Sorrel p.122  
*Rumex acetosa*



Curled Dock p.123  
*Rumex crispus*



Monk's-rhubarb p.125  
*Rumex pseudoalpinus*



Sweet Violet p.130  
*Viola odorata*



Common Mallow p.126  
*Malva sylvestris*



Marsh-mallow p.129  
*Althaea officinalis*



Garlic Mustard,  
Jack-by-the-hedge p.135  
*Alliaria petiolata*



Winter-cress p.135  
*Barbarea vulgaris*



Water-cress p.136  
*Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum*



Horse-radish p.138  
*Armoracia rusticana*



Hairy Bitter-cress  
p.140  
*Cardamine hirsuta*



Cuckooflower,  
Lady's-smock p.140  
*Cardamine pratensis*



Common Scurvygrass p.142  
*Cochlearia officinalis*



Shepherd's-purse p.144  
*Capsella bursa-pastoris*



Field Penny-cress p.145  
*Thlaspi arvense*



Dittander p.146  
*Lepidium latifolium*



Wild Cabbage p.146  
*Brassica oleracea*



Black Mustard p.149  
*Brassica nigra*



White Mustard p.149  
*Sinapis alba*



Sea-kale p150  
*Crambe maritima*



Crowberry p154  
*Empetrum nigrum*



Heather p157  
*Calluna vulgaris*



Bilberry p160  
*Vaccinium myrtillus*



Cranberry p163  
*Vaccinium oxycoccos*



Cowberry p163  
*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*



Redcurrant  
p170  
*Ribes rubrum*



Blackcurrant p173  
*Ribes nigrum*

Gooseberry p174  
*Ribes uva-ursi*



Primrose p169  
*Primula vulgaris*



Opposite-leaved  
Golden-saxifrage p176  
*Chrysanthemum oppositifolium*



Cowslip p164  
*Primula veris*



Meadowsweet p177  
*Filipendula ulmaria*



Raspberry p.179  
*Rubus idaeus*



Blackberry, Bramble p.182  
*Rubus fruticosus*



Dewberry p.186  
*Rubus coccineus*



Cloudberry p.186  
*Rubus chamaemorus*



Silverweed p.188  
*Potentilla anserina*



Wild Strawberry p.191  
*Fragaria vesca*



Herb-bennet,  
Wood Avens p.192  
*Geum urbanum*



Salad Burnet p.193  
*Sanguisorba minor*



Parsley-piert p.194  
*Aphanes arvensis*



Wild Rose, Dog-rose p.196  
*Rosa canina*



Bitter-vetch p.204  
*Lathyrus linifolius*



Restharrow p.204  
*Oenanthe repens*



Rosebay Willowherb p.204  
*Chamaerion angustifolium*



Large-flowered  
Evening-primrose  
p.207  
*Oenothera glazioviana*



Dwarf Cornel p.207  
*Cornus suecica*



Dog's Mercury p.208  
*Mercurialis perennis*



Sun Spurge



Petty Spurge



Dwarf Spurge

Spurge p.208  
*Euphorbia species*



Wood-sorrel p.210  
*Oxalis acetosella*



Jewel-weed,  
Orange Balsam p.215  
*Impatiens capensis*



Sea-holly p.216  
*Eryngium maritimum*



Sweet Cicely p.220  
*Myrrhis odorata*



Coriander p.222  
*Coriandrum sativum*



Alexanders p.225  
*Smyrniolus olusatrum*



Cow Parsley p.218  
*Anthriscus sylvestris*



Pignut p.226  
*Conopodium majus*



Ground-elder,  
Gourweed p.229  
*Asopogon podagraria*



Rock Samphire p.230  
*Crithmum maritimum*





Tubular water-dropwort



Parsley water-dropwort

Fine-leaved water-dropwort



Hemlock water-dropwort



Fool's Parsley p.233  
*Aethusa cynapium*



Parsley p.240  
*Petroselinum crispum*

The Water-dropworts p.232  
*Oenanthe species*



Fennel p.234  
*Foeniculum vulgare*



Hemlock p.239  
*Conium maculatum*



Wild Celery p.239  
*Apium graveolens*



Scots Lovage p.240  
*Ligusticum scoticum*



Wild Parsnip p.243  
*Pastinaca sativa*



Hogweed,  
Cow Parsnip p.243  
*Heracleum sphondylium*



Lungwort p.244  
*Pulmonaria officinalis*



Common Comfrey p.247  
*Symphytum officinale*



Borage p.248  
*Borago officinalis*



Oysterplant p.251  
*Mertensia maritima*



White Dead-nettle p254  
*Lamium album*



Yellow Archangel  
p254  
*Lamium galeobdolon*



Red Dead-nettle p254  
*Lamium purpureum*



Henbit Dead-nettle  
p254  
*Lamium amplexicaule*



Ground-ivy p253  
*Glechoma hederacea*



Balm p258  
*Melissa officinalis*



Wild Marjoram,  
Oregano p261  
*Origanum vulgare*



Wild Thyme p265  
*Thymus species*



Water Mint p266  
*Mentha aquatica*



Corn Mint p268  
*Mentha arvensis*



Spear Mint p268  
*Mentha spicata*



Apple-mint p268  
*Mentha villosa*



Whorled  
Mint p268  
*Mentha verticillata*



Peppermint p268  
*Mentha piperita*



Greater Plantain p270  
*Plantago major*



Brooklime p271  
*Veronica beccabunga*



Lady's Bedstraw p272  
*Galium verum*



Woodruff p.276  
*Galium odoratum*



Common Cornsalad,  
Lamb's-lettuce p.278  
*Valerianella locusta*



Red Valerian p.279  
*Centranthus ruber*

Goosegrass,  
Cleavers p.275  
*Galium aparine*



Burdock p.280  
*Arctium minus*



Marsh Thistle  
p.282  
*Cirsium palustre*



Milk Thistle p.282  
*Silybum marianum*



Hardhead, Common  
Knapweed p.284  
*Centaurea nigra*



Chicory p.285  
*Cichorium intybus*



Nipplewort p.287  
*Lapsana communis*



Cat's-ear p.287  
*Hypochaeris radicata*



Rough Hawkbit p.287  
*Lactuca biopida*



Perennial  
Sow-thistle p.287  
*Sonchus oleraceus*



Goat's-beard p.288  
*Trigonopogon pratensis*



Salsify p.288  
*Trigonopogon porrbilobus*



Dandelion p.291  
*Taraxacum* species



Tansy p.295  
*Tanacetum vulgare*



Wormwood p.296  
*Artemisia absinthium*



Mugwort p.297  
*Artemisia vulgaris*



Yarrow p.298  
*Achillea millefolium*



Common Chamomile p.301  
*Chamaemelum nobile*



Oxeye Daisy p.302  
*Leucanthemum vulgare*



Lords-and-ladies, Arum Lily p.303  
*Arisaema maculatum*



Common Reed p.304  
*Phragmites australis*



Spiked Star-of-Berliehem, Bath Asparagus p.307  
*Oxithobogon germanicum*



Ramsons, Wild Garlic p.308  
*Allium ursinum*



Asparagus p.315  
*Asparagus officinalis*



Sand Leek p.312  
*Allium scorodoprasum*



Chives p.312  
*Allium schoenoprasum*



Early-purple Orchid p.316  
*Orchis mascula*



Morel p.324  
*Morchella esculenta*



*Microphorus ventricosa*



*Morchella ramida*



*Morchella vulgaris*



False Morel p.329  
*Gyromitra esculenta*



Truffle p.330  
*Tuber aestivum*



Cauliflower Fungus,  
Sparassis p.332  
*Sparassis crispa*



*Ramaria formosa*



Horn of Plenty p.334  
*Craterellus cornucopioides*



Chanterelle p.336  
*Cantarellus cibarius*



*Cantarellus refundiformis*



Wood Hedgehog p.339  
*Hydnum repandum*



*Sarcodon imbricatus*



Beefsteak  
Fungus p.340  
*Fittulina hepatica*



St George's Mushroom p.341  
*Calocybe gambosa*



Field Blewit p.343  
*Lepista nuda*



Wood Blewit p.343  
*Lepista omnia*



Honey Fungus p.344  
*Armillaria mellea*



Fairy-ring Champignon p.349  
*Marasmius oreades*



Chicken-of-the-woods p.353  
*Lactarius stipitarius*



Field Mushroom p.362  
*Agaricus campestris*



Anise Cap p.346  
*Clitocybe odora*



Oyster Mushroom p.350  
*Pleurotus ostreatus*



Parasol Mushroom p.359  
*Macrolepiota procera*



Shaggy Parasol p.361  
*Macrolepiota rhododes*



Velvet Shank,  
Winter Mushroom p.347  
*Flammulina velutipes*



Panthercap p.354  
*Amanita pantherina*



Destroying Angel p.354  
*Amanita virosa*



Deathcap p.354  
*Amanita phalloides*



Fly Agaric p.354  
*Amanita muscaria*



Bleeding Brown  
Mushroom p.366  
*Agaricus haemorrhoidarius*



**Brown Wood  
Mushroom p.367**  
*Agaricus silvaticus*



**Wood Mushroom p.367**  
*Agaricus silvaticus*



*Agaricus macrourus*



*Agaricus augustus*



**Cultivated  
Mushroom p.369**  
*Agaricus bisporus*



*Agaricus bisporus*



**Horse Mushroom  
p.370**  
*Agaricus arvensis*



**Yellow-staining  
Mushroom p.373**  
*Agaricus xanthoderma*



*Agaricus placomyces*



**Shaggy Inkcap,  
Lawyer's Wig p.374**  
*Coprinus comatus*



**Red-staining Inocybe p.377**  
*Inocybe pannillardi*



*Gaivrina muscaria*



**Cep p.378**  
*Boletus edulis*



**Bay Boletus p.380**  
*Boletus badius*



**Yellow-cracked Boletus p.380**  
*Boletus subinermis*



**Devil's Boletus p.383**  
*Boletus satanas*



*Boletus erythropus*



*Gyrophorus cyanescens*



Slippery Jack p.384  
*Suillus luteus*



*Suillus granulatus*



Larch Bolete p.386  
*Suillus grevillei*



Brown Birch Bolete p.386  
*Leccinum scabrum*



Orange Birch Bolete p.386  
*Leccinum verrucosum*



Bare-toothed Russula p.389  
*Russula vesca*



Yellow Swamp Russula p.391  
*Russula clavata*



Green-cracking Russula p.391  
*Russula viridicr*



*Russula xerampelina*



*Russula krumboltzi*



Charcoal Burner p.392  
*Russula cyanomurina*



*Russula rosea*



The Sickener p.392  
*Russula emetica*



*Russula aeroginea*



Saffron Milk Cap p.394  
*Lactarius deliciosus*



Jew's Ear p.402  
*Auricularia auricula-judae*



Common Puffball p.401  
*Lycoperdon perlatum*



*Calvatia utriformis*



Giant Puffball p.397  
*Calvatia gigantea*





Maidenhair Fern p.406  
*Adiantum capillus-veneris*



Iceland Moss p.406  
*Cetraria islandica*



Rock Tripe p.406  
*Umbilicaria pustulata*



Sea Lettuce  
p.412  
*Ulva lactuca*



Gurweed p.414  
*Enteromorpha intestinalis*



Dabberlocks p.417  
*Maria esculenta*



Kelp - Oarweed,  
Tangle p.414  
*Laminaria digitata*



Kelp - Sea Belt,  
Poor-man's  
Weather-glass p.414  
*Laminaria saccharina*



Dulse p.418  
*Palmaria palmata*



Bladder Wrack,  
Popweed p.417  
*Fucus vesiculosus*



Pepper Dulse p.418  
*Laurencia pinnatifida*



Purple Laver p.421  
*Porphyra umbilicalis*



Carrageen,  
Irish Moss p.422  
*Chondrus crispus*



*Gigartina stellata*



Common Limpet  
p.428  
*Patella vulgata*



Common Periwinkle,  
Winkle p.431  
*Littorina littorea*



Common Mussel,  
Blue Mussel p.432  
*Mytilus edulis*



Scallop p.434  
*Pecten maximus*



Oyster p.435  
*Ostrea edulis*



Cockle p.436  
*Cerastoderma edule*



Clam, Sand Gaper p.438  
*Mya arenaria*

# Glossary of terms

**Alternate leaves** – one leaf per node, successive ones on opposite sides of the stem

**Annual** – any plant that germinates from seed, grows to maturity and produces new seed all within one year or growing season

**Basal leaves** – leaves growing at the bottom of the stem

**Biennial** – a plant which takes more than one but less than two years to complete its life cycle, not flowering in the first year

**Boss** – protuberance or swelling, often at base of trunk

**Bracts** – modified leaves growing close to a flower or flowerhead and protecting it

**Bulb** – swollen underground food-storage organ for the dormant plant, consisting of condensed stem and succulent scale-like leaves

**Calyx** – ring of petal-like sepals (usually green) which protect the flower when in bud

**Catkin** – drooping spike-bearing much-reduced flowers, generally wind-pollinated, e.g. hazel

**Compound leaves** – leaves made up of separate leaflets

**Drupelet** – one part of a compound fruit (e.g. blackberry, raspberry), consisting of a small fleshy fruit containing a seed enclosed in a hard coat

**Fissured bark** – deeply cracked bark

**Floret** – group of tiny flowers

**Flower-head** – group of tightly-packed flowers

**Leaflet** – a division of a compound leaf

**Linear leaves** – long and narrow leaves

**Lobed leaves** – leaves with rounded projections

**Mast** – fruit of forest trees such as beech, oak, etc

**Naturalised** – an alien plant which has established a self-sustaining population

**Nodes** – thickened parts of the stem which may grow opposite each other, or be alternate up the stem

**Odd-pinnate** – pinnate leaf with a single terminal leaflet

**Perennial** – a plant that lives from year to year, generally with woody stems or organs (tubers, corms, bulbs)

**Pinnate leaves** – leaves with leaflets growing along either side of central vein

**Reflexed** – bent down or back

**Rhizomes** – underground stems

**Rosette** – leaves spreading from the centre

**Runners** – stems which grow horizontally above or below the ground and develop small roots and new plants at their tips

**Sepal** – any of the separate parts of the calyx

**Shrub** – a woody plant that is not a tree

**Simple leaves** – leaves with undivided blades, not compound leaves

**Spike** – flowerhead in which all the flowers are attached to a single column, with no individual flower stalks

**Stamen** – male part of flower, consisting of a tall, thin stalk or filament with an enlarged part (the anther) at the top containing pollen

**Stigma** – female, often feathery, part of style where pollen lands from a male flower during pollination

**Stipe** – stalk-bearing reproductive structure in plants, especially the stalk bearing the cap of a mushroom

**Style** – tall column at the centre of a flower, bearing the stigma

**Succulent** – a plant with thick, fleshy leaves or stems

**Toothed leaves** – jagged-edged leaves

**Tree** – a woody plant, usually more than 5 m (16 ft) high, with a single trunk

**Trefoil** – plants having leaves divided into three leaflets

**Tuber** – swollen roots or underground stems

**Umbel** – many flowers arising from the same point on a stalk to form a flat-topped umbrella shape, e.g. cow parsley

**Whorls** – several leaves growing round the stem at each node

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# Index

Entries in *italic* indicate photographs or illustrations.

- A**  
*Achillea millefolium* 298, 298, 299, 433, 433  
*Adiantum capillus-veneris* 406, 407, 436, 436  
*Aegopodium podagraria* 228, 229, 447, 447  
*Aethusa cynapium* 231, 231, 448, 448  
*Agaricus arvensis* 270, 270, 454, 454  
*Agaricus augustus* 268, 268, 454, 454  
*Agaricus bisporus* 269, 269, 454, 454  
*Agaricus bisporus* 269, 454, 454  
*Agaricus campestris* 262, 262, 264, 264, 453, 453  
*Agaricus haemorrhoidarius* 266, 266, 453, 453  
*Agaricus macroporus* 268, 454, 454  
*Agaricus placomyces* 270, 270, 454, 454  
*Agaricus silvaticus* 267, 267, 454, 454  
*Agaricus silvaticus* 267, 267, 454, 454  
*Agaricus silvaticus* 267, 267, 454, 454  
*Agaricus xanthodermus* 272, 454, 454  
*Alaria officinalis* 411, 411, 436, 436  
Alexanders 6, 115, 224, 225, 447, 447  
*Alliaria petiolata* 124, 125, 443, 443  
*Allium schoenoprasum* 32, 32, 451, 451  
*Allium scabrocapitatum* 32, 32, 451, 451  
*Allium ursinum* 208, 208, 209–10, 433, 433  
*Althaea officinalis* 128, 129, 443, 443  
*Amanita muscaria* 254, 255, 453, 453  
*Amanita pantherina* 254, 255, 453, 453  
*Amanita phalloides* 254, 255, 453, 453  
*Amanita species* 254, 453, 453  
*Amanita virosa* 254, 255, 453, 453  
Amaranth, Common 112, 442, 442  
*Amaranthus retrofractus* 112, 442, 442  
*Ameletus lanarctii* 73, 73, 441, 441  
Anise Cap 246, 246, 453, 453  
*Anthriscus sylvestris* 218, 218, 219, 447, 447  
*Aphanes arvensis* 194, 195, 446, 446  
*Asium graveolens* 228, 229, 448, 448  
Apple: Crab 62, 65, 66, 67, 441, 441  
    -mint 268, 449, 449  
*Arctium minus* 280, 280, 450, 450  
*Armillaria mellea* 244, 244, 245, 453, 453  
*Arnica montana* 138–9, 138, 444, 444  
*Artemisia absinthium* 296, 296, 451, 451  
*Artemisia vulgaris* 297, 297, 451, 451  
Arum Lily 203, 203, 451, 451  
*Arum maculatum* 203, 203, 451, 451  
Asparagus 274, 275, 275, 451, 451  
    Bath 208, 207, 207, 451, 451  
*Asparagus officinalis* 274, 275, 275, 451, 451  
*Atriplex patula* 104, 105, 442, 442  
*Atriplex portulacoides* 104, 105, 442, 442  
*Atriplex prostrata* 104, 442, 442  
*Auricularia auricular-judae* 402, 402, 455, 455  
Autumn Pudding 183
- B**  
Balm 278, 278, 449, 449
- Barbarea vulgaris* 135, 444, 444  
Barberry 34, 35, 440, 440  
Bare-Toothed Russula 268, 269, 455, 455  
Bath Asparagus 208, 207, 207, 451, 451  
Bay Bolete 280, 280, 454, 454  
Beech 401, 41–2, 42, 440, 440  
Beech-leaf Noyau 42  
Beechwood Sickener 292, 292, 455, 455  
Beefsteak Fungus 240, 240, 452, 452  
Beetroot and Cep Soup 278  
*Berberis vulgaris* 34, 35, 440, 440  
*Beta vulgaris maritima* 106–7, 106, 422, 422  
Bilberry 160–1, 160, 445, 445  
Bistort 118, 118, 121, 443, 443  
Bitter-Vetch 204, 446, 446  
Black Currant 172, 173, 445, 445  
Black Mustard 149, 444, 444  
Blackberry 182–3, 182, 182–3, 446, 446  
Blackthorn 58, 59, 440, 440  
Bladder Campion 116, 116, 117, 443, 443  
Bladder Wrock 408, 407, 456, 456  
Bleeding Brown Mushroom 266, 266, 453, 453  
Blewitz Field 143, 437, 437  
    Tripe-style 243, Wood 242, 243  
Blue Mussel 422, 422, 423, 456, 456  
Bog-myrtle 98, 97, 442, 442  
Bolete: Bay 280, 280, 454, 454  
    Brown Birch 286, 287, 455, 455  
    Devil's 282, 282, 454, 454  
    Larch 286, 287, 455, 455  
    Red-cracked 280, 280  
    Yellow-cracked 280, 280, 454, 454  
*Boletus edulis* 280, 280, 454, 454  
*Boletus chrysenteron* 280, 280  
*Boletus edulis* 278, 279, 454, 454  
*Boletus erythropus* 282, 454, 454  
*Boletus suzannei* 282, 282, 454, 454  
*Boletus submentovus* 280, 280, 454, 454  
Borage 148, 148, 270–1, 448, 448  
*Borago officinalis* 248, 248, 270–1, 448, 448  
Bramble 182–3, 182, 182–3, 446, 446  
*Brazillia nigra* 149, 444, 444  
*Brazillia oleracea* 146, 147, 444, 444  
Brooklime 271, 271, 449, 449  
Brown Birch Bolete 286, 287, 455, 455  
Brown Wood Mushroom 267, 267, 454, 454  
Bullace 63, 63, 441, 441  
Burdock 280, 280, 450, 450
- C**  
Cabbage, Wild 146, 147, 444, 444  
*Calluna vulgaris* 156, 157, 158–9, 445, 445  
*Calycybe gambusia* 242, 242, 452, 452  
*Calvatia gigantea* 296, 297, 298, 299, 403, 455, 455  
*Calvatia atriformis* 298, 298, 455, 455  
*Cambarellus cibarius* 226, 227, 452, 452  
*Cambarellus infundibuliformis* 227, 227, 452, 452  
*Capella bursa-pastoris* 142, 142, 444, 444  
*Cardamine hirsuta* 140, 141, 444, 444  
*Cardamine pratensis* 140, 141, 444, 444  
*Carpobrotus edulis* 98, 98, 202, 442, 442  
Carrageen 422, 422, 456, 456  
*Cassia sativa* 44, 45, 440, 440  
Cat's-ear 266, 267, 450, 450  
Cauliflower Fungus 232, 232, 452, 452  
Celery, Wild 278, 279, 448, 448  
*Centaurea nigra* 284, 284, 450, 450  
*Centruncus ruber* 229, 229, 450, 450  
Cep 278, 279, 454, 454  
*Cerastium edule* 436–7, 436, 456, 456  
*Cetaria islandica* 406, 407, 456, 456  
*Chamaemelum nobile* 206, 207, 451, 451  
*Chamaecrista angustifolia* 204, 205, 446, 446  
Chamomile, Common 206, 207, 451, 451  
Chanterelle 226, 227, 452, 452  
Charcoal Burner 292, 292, 455, 455  
*Chenopodium album* 100, 100, 422, 422  
*Chenopodium bonus-henricus* 102, 102, 442, 442  
Cherry, Wild 60, 61, 441, 441  
Chestnut, Sweet 44, 25, 48, 47, 48, 48, 440, 440  
Chicken-of-the-woods 222, 223, 453, 453  
Chickweed 112, 112, 114, 115, 443, 443  
Chicory 287, 287, 450, 450  
Chinese-style Auricularia Soup 402  
Chives 112, 312, 437, 437  
*Chondrus crispus* 422, 422, 456, 456  
*Clerodendron oppositifolium* 276, 276, 445, 445  
Clutney, Uncooked Apple and Pear 64  
*Cichorium intybus* 285, 285, 450, 450  
*Cirsium palustre* 282, 282, 450, 450  
Clam 438, 438, 456, 456  
Cleavers 274, 275  
*Clinoclype odorata* 246, 246, 453, 453  
Cloudberry 186, 187, 446, 446  
*Cochlearia officinalis* 142, 142, 444, 444  
Cockle 426–7, 426, 456, 456  
Comfrey, Common 248, 247–8, 448, 448  
*Conium maculatum* 228, 229, 448, 448  
*Conopodium majus* 226, 227, 447, 447  
*Coprinus comatus* 274, 275, 454, 454  
Coriander 222, 223, 447, 447  
*Coriandrum sativum* 222, 223, 447, 447  
Corn Mint 268, 269, 449, 449  
Cornel, Dwarf 206, 207, 447, 447  
Cornsalad, Common 277, 277, 450, 450  
*Cornus suecica* 206, 207, 447, 447  
*Corylus avellana* 12, 13, 24, 55, 440, 440  
Cow Parsley 218, 218, 219, 447, 447  
Cow Parsnip 242, 242, 448, 448  
Cowberry 182, 183, 445, 445

Cowslip 164, 166-7, 445, 447  
Crab Apple 64, 66, 68, 67, 441, 447  
*Cranhe maritima* 130, 131, 132, 133, 445, 447  
Cranberry 165, 445, 447  
*Crataegus monogyna* 76, 77, 441, 447  
*Craterellus cornuopistatus* 334, 334, 335, 457, 457  
*Crithmum maritimum* 130-1, 270, 447, 447  
Crowberry 154, 154, 155, 445, 447  
Crystallised Sweet Violets 130  
Cuckooflower 140, 145, 444, 444  
Cultivated Mushroom 169, 169, 454, 454

## D

Dabberlocks 413, 413, 456, 456  
Daisy, Oaeye 302, 302, 431, 431  
Damon's 62, 62, 441, 441  
Dandelion 206, 291, 292, 292, 450, 450  
Dead-nettles 154  
Deathcap 134, 315, 435, 437  
Destroying Angel 354, 377, 457, 457  
Devil's Bolete 362, 362, 454, 454  
Dewberry 186, 187, 446, 446  
Dittander 146, 444, 444  
Dock, Cutled 124, 125, 442, 442  
Dog's Mercury 208, 209, 447, 447  
Dog-rose 196, 197, 198-9, 446, 446  
Dulse 418, 418, 456, 456  
Dwarf Cornel 206, 207, 447, 447

## E

Early-purple Orchid 116, 375, 451, 451  
East Anglian Melde Chicken 101  
edible plants 22-4  
Elder/Elderflower 78, 78, 80-1, 82, 83, 84, 441, 447  
*Eupetrum nigrum* 154, 154, 335, 445, 445  
*Enteromorpha intestinulis* 414, 415, 456, 456  
*Eryngium maritimum* 156, 157, 447, 447  
*Euphorbia* species 208, 209, 447, 447  
Evening-primrose, Large-flowered 208, 207, 446, 446

## F

*Fagus sylvatica* 40, 41, 440, 440  
Fairy-ring Champignon 348, 349, 457, 457  
False Morel 328, 329, 302, 432, 432  
Far-hen 100, 100, 422, 422  
Fennel 234, 235, 238-7, 448, 448  
Fern, Maidenhair 406, 407, 456, 456  
Field Blewit 343, 457, 457  
Field Mushroom 361, 362, 364, 365, 457, 457  
Field Penny-cress 145, 145, 444, 444  
*Filipendula ulmaria* 177, 177, 445, 445  
*Fistulina hepatica* 140, 340, 452, 452  
*Flammulina velutipes* 347, 347, 457, 457  
Fly Agaric 154, 155, 457, 457  
*Fusiculium vulgare* 214, 215, 448, 448  
Fool's Parsley 211, 211, 448, 448  
*Fragaria vesca* 198, 199, 446, 446

*Fucus vesiculosus* 416, 417, 457, 456, 456  
fungi 20, 318-403 *see also under*  
*individual fungus name*

## G

*Galerina mutabilis* 377, 454, 454  
*Galium adoratium* 276, 277, 450, 450  
*Galium aparine* 274, 275, 450, 450  
*Galium verum* 272, 272, 275, 449, 449  
Garlic Mustard 124, 135, 443, 443  
Wild 308, 309, 310-1, 457, 457  
*Geum urbanum* 192, 192, 446, 446  
Giant Puffball 206, 297, 298, 298, 404, 455, 457  
*Gigartina stellata* 422, 456, 456  
Glasswort 108, 109, 109, 111, 441, 441  
*Glechoma hederacea* 253, 253, 449, 449  
Goat's-beard 288, 288, 450, 450  
Good-King-Henry 202, 103, 442, 442  
Gooseberry 174-5, 174, 443, 443  
Goosegrass 274, 275, 450, 450  
Gourweed 228, 229, 447, 447  
Greater Plantain 170, 270, 449, 449  
Green-cracking Russula 391, 455, 457  
Greens, a Menu of 115  
Ground-elder 228, 229, 447, 447  
Ground-ivy 255, 255, 449, 449  
Gutweed 414, 415, 456, 456  
*Gynerium excelsum* 328, 329, 209, 452, 452  
*Gynerium cyaneocent* 328, 454, 454

## H

Hairy Bitter-cress 140, 341, 444, 444  
Hardhead 284, 284, 450, 450  
Hawthorn 78, 78, 441, 441  
Hazel 32, 32, 54, 55, 440, 440  
Heather 156, 157, 158-9, 445, 447  
Hemlock 238, 239, 448, 448  
Henbit Dead-nettle 254, 255, 449, 449  
*Heracleum sphondylium* 242, 242, 448, 448  
Herb Scones 260  
Herb-beenet 192, 192, 446, 446  
Hogweed 245, 245, 448, 448  
Honey Fungus 344, 344, 345, 457, 457  
Hop 36, 37, 440, 440  
Horn of Plenty 334, 334, 335, 452, 452  
Horse Mushroom 270, 270, 454, 454  
Horse-radish 138-9, 138, 444, 444  
Hottentot-tig 98, 98, 442, 442  
*Humulus lupulus* 36, 37, 440, 440  
*Hydium repandum* 158, 359, 452, 452  
*Hypochaeris radicata* 286, 287, 450, 450

## I

Iceland Moss 406, 407, 456, 456  
*Impatiens capensis* 214, 215, 215, 447, 447  
*Imryche patula* 276, 277, 454, 454  
Irish Moss 422, 423, 456, 456

## J

Jack-by-the-hedge 134, 135, 443, 443  
Jam, Wild Fruit 63  
Jew's Ear 401, 202, 455, 455  
Jewel-weed 224, 225, 225, 447, 447  
Jugged Celery and Windfalls 67  
*Juglans regia* 98, 98, 440, 440  
Juneberry 73, 73, 441, 441  
Juniper 32, 32, 440, 440  
*Juniperus communis* 32, 32, 440, 440

## K

Kelp 414, 415, 456, 456  
Knapweed, Common 284, 284, 450, 450

## L

*Lactarius deliciosus* 394, 394, 457, 457  
*Lactarius helveticus* 395  
*Lactarius torminosus* 395, 397  
Lady's Bedstraw 272, 272, 275, 449, 449  
Lady's-smock 140, 141, 444, 444  
*Laetiporus sulphureus* 372, 373, 453, 453  
Lamb and Plum Tagine 63  
Lamb's-lettuce 278, 278, 450, 450  
*Laminaria globuliformis* 254, 255, 449, 449  
*Laminaria digitata* 414, 415, 456, 456  
*Laminaria saccharina* 414, 415, 456, 456  
*Laminaria alba* 254, 255, 449, 449  
*Laminaria amplicostata* 254, 255, 449, 449  
*Laminaria purpurea* 254, 255, 449, 449  
*Lapponia communis* 286, 287, 450, 450  
Larch Bolete 386, 387, 457, 457  
Large-flowered Evening-primrose 208, 207, 446, 446  
*Lathyrus linifolius* 204, 446, 446  
*Laurencia pinnatifida* 418, 456, 456  
Liver Sauce 421  
Liverbread 421  
Lawyer's Wig 174, 375, 454, 454  
*Leccinum scabrum* 386, 387, 455, 455  
*Leccinum verrucosum* 386, 387, 457, 457  
Lemon-balm Tea 258  
*Leontodon hispidus* 286, 287, 450, 450  
*Lepidium latifolium* 146, 444, 444  
*Lepista nuda* 342, 343, 452, 452  
*Lepista sarcus* 343, 452, 452  
*Leucanthemum vulgare* 302, 302, 457, 457  
lichens and ferns 404-7 *see also under*  
*individual lichen and fern name*  
*Ligularia scoticum* 140, 140, 448, 448  
Lily, Arum 305, 305, 457, 457  
Lime 58, 57, 440, 440  
Limpet, Common 428, 428, 456, 456  
*Littorina littorea* 430, 431, 456, 456  
Lords-and-ladies 203, 203, 451, 451  
Lovage, Scots 240, 241, 448, 448  
Lungwort 244, 244, 245, 448, 448  
*Lycopodium perlatum* 400, 400, 455, 455

## M

- Macrolepista procera* 258, 359, 455, 457  
*Macrolepista rhacodes* 360, 361, 455, 457  
*Malva aquifolium* 84, 85, 86, 441, 442  
 Malbowle 276  
 Maidenhair Fern 406, 407, 456, 458  
 Mallow Wafers 126  
 Mallow, Common 126, 127, 443, 445  
*Malva sylvestris* 64, 85, 441, 442  
*Malva sylvestris* 126, 127, 443, 445  
*Manisuris arvensis* 348, 349, 455, 457  
 Marjoram, Wild 260, 261, 262, 263, 449, 449  
 Marsh Samphire 6, 9, 10, 11, 208, 209, 210, 211, 442, 442  
 Marsh Thistle 282, 282, 450, 450  
 Marsh-mallow 128, 129, 443, 445  
 May-tree 76, 77, 441, 442  
 Meadowsweet 177, 177, 445, 445  
 Medlar 74, 75, 441, 442  
*Melissa officinalis* 258, 258, 449, 449  
 Melokhia 129  
*Mentha aquatica* 266, 267, 449, 449  
*Mentha arvensis* 268, 269, 449, 449  
*Mentha piperita* 268, 269, 449, 449  
*Mentha spicata* 268, 269, 449, 449  
*Mentha verticillata* 268, 449, 449  
*Mentha villosa* 268, 449, 449  
*Mercurialis perennis* 208, 209, 447, 447  
*Mertensia maritima* 252, 252, 448, 448  
*Mespilus germanica* 74, 75, 441, 442  
 Milk Cap: Saffron 394, 394, 455, 455  
 Woolly 395, 395  
 Milk Thistle 282, 282, 450, 450  
 Mint  
 Apple- 268, 449, 449, Corn 268, 269, 449, 449  
 Spear 268, 269, 449, 449, Water 266, 267, 449, 449  
 Whorled 268, 449, 449  
*Microphora acutiloba* 326, 452, 452  
 Monk's-rhubarb 125, 443, 443  
 Moorland Tea 157  
*Morchella esculenta* 324, 325, 452, 452  
*Morchella rotunda* 326, 452, 452  
*Morchella vulgaris* 326, 326, 452, 452  
 Morel 324, 325, 326, 326, 327, 452, 452  
 False 328, 329, 329, 452, 452  
 Moose Iceland 406, 407, 456, 456  
 Irish 422, 423, 456, 456  
 Mountain-ash 68, 69, 441, 442  
 Mugwort 297, 297, 455, 455  
 mushroom *see under individual mushroom name*  
 Mussel: Blue 432, 432, 455, 456, 456  
 Common 432, 432, 455, 456, 456  
 Mustard: Black 449, 444, 444  
 Garlic 154, 155, 443, 443  
 White 148, 149, 444, 444  
*Mya arenaria* 408, 409, 456, 456  
*Myrica gale* 98, 97, 442, 442  
*Myrrhis odorata* 220, 221, 447, 447  
*Mytilus edulis* 432, 432, 455, 456, 456

## N

- Nettle Soup 94  
 Nipplewort 286, 287, 450, 450  
 Noma 6, 10-11  
 Nut Cutler 55  
 O  
 Oak 58, 57, 52, 440, 440  
 Oarweed 414, 415, 456, 456  
*Oenanthe species* 232, 232, 448, 448  
*Oenothera glazioviana* 208, 207, 446, 446  
 Okrochka 235  
 Olives Oregon 262  
*Ononis repens* 202, 202, 446, 446  
 Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage 176, 176, 445, 445  
 Orache: Common 104, 205, 442, 442  
 Spear-leaved 104, 442, 442  
 Orange: Balsam 214, 215, 215, 447, 447  
 Birch Bolete 386, 387, 455, 455  
 Orchid, Early-purple 316, 317, 451, 451  
*Orchis masculis* 316, 317, 451, 451  
 Oregano 260, 261, 262, 262, 449, 449  
 Oregon-grape 84, 85, 85, 441, 442  
*Origanum vulgare* 260, 261, 262, 262, 449, 449  
*Ornithogalum pyrenaicum* 306, 307, 307, 455, 455  
*Ostrya edulis* 435, 435, 456, 456  
*Oxalis acetosella* 210, 211, 212-13, 447, 447  
 Oxeye Daisy 302, 302, 455, 455  
 Oyster Mushroom 350, 351, 455, 455  
 Oysterplant 252, 252, 448, 448  
 P  
*Palmaria palmata* 418, 419, 456, 456  
 Panthercap 354, 355, 455, 455  
*Papaver rhoeas* 88, 88, 89-91, 442, 442  
 Parasol Mushroom 258, 359, 455, 455  
 Parsley 240, 448, 448  
 Cow 218, 218, 219, 447, 447  
 Fool's 233, 233, 448, 448  
 -piert 194, 195, 446, 446  
 Parsnip: Cow 242, 243, 448, 448  
 Wild 242, 243, 448, 448  
*Parnassia nutans* 242, 243, 448, 448  
*Patella vulgata* 428, 429, 456, 456  
*Pecten maximus* 434, 434, 456, 456  
 Penny-cress, Field 145, 145, 444, 444  
 Pepper Dulse 418, 456, 456  
 Peppermint 108, 260, 449, 449  
 Perennial Sow-thistle 286, 287, 450, 450  
 Periwinkle, Common 438, 438, 456, 456  
*Perrucaria histaria* 108, 109, 120, 121, 443, 443  
*Perrucaria maculata* 120, 121, 443, 443  
*Petrucellium crispum* 240, 448, 448  
*Phragmites australis* 304, 304, 305, 451, 451  
 picking rules 19, 21, 22  
 Pickled Samphire 11

- Pignut 226, 227, 447, 447  
 Pigweed 121, 442, 442  
 Pine, Scots 30, 31, 440, 440  
 Pine Needle 50  
*Pinus sylvestris* 30, 31, 440, 440  
*Plantago major* 370, 370, 449, 449  
 plants: edible 22-4; herbaceous 86-37  
*see also under individual plant name*  
*Pleuraria striata* 350, 350, 455, 455  
 Plums, Wild 62, 62, 62, 441, 442  
 Pontack Sauce 15  
 Poor-man's Weather-glass 414, 415, 456, 456  
 Poppy: Common 88, 89, 89-91, 442, 442  
 Field 88, 89, 89-91, 442, 442  
 Popweed 416, 417, 456, 456  
*Porphyra umbilicalis* 422, 456, 456  
*Prasella asperula* 188, 189, 446, 446  
 Primrose 168, 169, 169, 445, 445  
 Large-flowered Evening-primrose 208, 207, 446, 446  
*Primula veris* 164, 165, 166-7, 445, 445  
*Primula vulgaris* 168, 169, 169, 445, 445  
*Prunus avium* 60, 61, 441, 442  
*Prunus species* 62, 62, 62  
*Prunus spinosa* 38, 39, 440, 440, 441, 441  
 Puffball: Common 400, 401, 451, 451  
 Giant 396, 397, 398, 399, 401, 451, 451  
*Pulsatilla officinalis* 244, 244, 245, 448, 448  
 Purple Laver 428, 428, 456, 456

## Q

- Quercus robur/Quercus petraea* 50, 51, 51, 440, 440

## R

- Ramaria formosa* 332, 333, 452, 452  
 Ramsons 308, 309, 309-11, 451, 451  
 Raspberry 178, 179, 180, 180, 446, 446  
 Red Currant 150, 151, 445, 445  
 Red Dead-nettle 254, 255, 449, 449  
 Red Valerian 279, 279, 450, 450  
 Red-cracked Bolete 386, 386  
 Redshank 209, 211, 443, 443  
 Red-staining Inocybe 358, 357, 454, 454  
 Reed, Common 304, 304, 305, 451, 451  
 Restharrow 204, 205, 446, 446  
*Ribes nigrum* 172, 173, 445, 445  
*Ribes rubrum* 170, 171, 445, 445  
*Ribes uva-crispa* 174-5, 174, 445, 445  
 Rock Samphire 230-1, 230, 447, 447  
 Rock Tripe 406, 407, 456, 456  
*Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum* 156, 157, 444, 444  
*Rosa canina* 196, 197, 198-9, 200-1, 200, 202-3, 446, 446  
 202-3, 446, 446  
 Rose: Dog-rose 196, 197, 198-9, 446, 446  
 Wild 196, 197, 198-9, 200-1, 201, 202-3, 446, 446  
 Ronchay Willowherb 204, 205, 446, 446  
 Roschips 200-1, 200, 202-3

Rose-petal Jam 196  
 Rough Hawkbit 286, 287, 450, 470  
 Rowan 68, 69, 441, 442  
*Rubus caesius* 186, 187, 446, 448  
*Rubus chamaemorus* 186, 187, 446, 448  
*Rubus fruticosus* 182-3, 182, 184-5, 446, 448  
*Rubus idaeus* 178, 179-80, 181, 446, 448  
*Rumex acetosa* 122, 123, 443  
*Rumex crispus* 124, 125, 443, 445  
*Rumex pseudonivipes* 125, 443, 445  
 Russula: Bare-Toothed 388, 389, 455,  
 475; Green-cracking 391, 455, 475;  
 Yellow Swamp 390, 391, 455, 475  
*Russula atrovirens* 391, 455, 475  
*Russula claroflava* 390, 391, 455, 475  
*Russula cyanoxantha* 392, 393, 455, 475  
*Russula emetic* 392, 455, 475  
*Russula esemplarioides* 391, 455, 475  
*Russula macer* 392, 393  
*Russula rufa* 392, 393, 455, 475  
*Russula speciosa* 388, 389, 455, 475  
*Russula vesca* 388, 389, 455, 475  
*Russula virescens* 391, 455, 475  
*Russula zerampelina* 391, 455, 475

## S

Saffron Milk Cap 394, 394, 455, 475  
 Salad Burnet 193, 193, 446, 448  
*Salicornia* species 108, 108, 111, 442, 447  
 Salsify 288, 289, 450, 470  
*Sambucus nigra* 78, 79, 80-1, 82, 83, 441, 442  
 Sampshire: Marsh 6, 9, 10, 11, 108, 108, 111, 111,  
 442, 445; Rock 230-1, 230, 447, 447  
 Sand Gaper 438, 438, 456, 478  
 Sand Leek 112, 112, 447, 477  
*Sanguisorba minor* 193, 193, 446, 448  
*Sarcodon imbricatum* 359, 452, 472  
 Scallop 454, 454, 456, 478  
 Schwarzwurz 148  
 Scots Lovage 240, 241, 448, 448  
 Scots Pise 30, 31, 440, 440  
 Scursygram, Common 142, 142, 444  
 Sea Beet 106-7, 106, 422, 422  
 Sea Belt 414, 417, 456, 478  
 Sea Lettuce 412, 412, 456, 478  
 Sea-holly 116, 117, 447, 447  
 Sea-kale 150, 151, 152, 152, 445, 445  
 Sea-purslane 104, 105, 442, 442  
 seaweeds 408-23  
 Service-tree, Wild 70, 71, 441, 441  
 Shaggy Inkcap 374, 375, 454, 454  
 Shaggy Parasol 369, 369, 453, 453  
 shellfish 424-38  
 Shepherd's-purse 144, 144, 444, 444  
 Sickener, The 392, 455, 475  
*Silene vulgaris* 116, 116, 117, 445, 445  
 Silverweed 188, 188, 446, 446  
*Silybum marianum* 282, 282, 450, 470  
*Sinapis alba* 148, 149, 444, 444

Slippery Jack 384, 455, 475  
 Sloe 58, 58, 440, 440  
*Smyrniolobos* 224, 225, 447, 447  
*Sonchus oleraceus* 286, 287, 450, 470  
*Sorbus aria* 72, 72, 441, 441  
*Sorbus aucuparia* 68, 68, 441, 441  
*Sorbus torminalis* 70, 71, 441, 441  
 Sorrel: Common 122, 123, 443, 443  
 Wood- 210, 211, 212-13, 447, 447  
 Sparassip 332, 333, 452, 472  
*Sparaxis crispus* 332, 333, 452, 472  
 Spear Mint 268, 269, 449, 449  
 Spiked Star-of-Bethlehem 306, 307,  
 307, 451, 471  
 Spinach, Wild 106-7, 106, 422, 422  
 Spurge 208, 209, 447, 447  
 St George's Mushroom 341, 342, 452, 472  
*Stellaria media* 112, 113, 114, 115, 442, 442  
 Stinging Nettle 82, 93-4, 85, 442, 442  
 Strawberry, Wild 190, 191, 446, 446  
 Stuffed Puffball 398  
*Stylois granulatus* 384, 385, 455, 475  
*Stylois gracilis* 386, 387, 455, 475  
*Stylois luteus* 384, 384, 455, 475  
 Summer Pudding 180  
 Sweet Chestnut 44, 45, 46, 47, 48,  
 48, 440, 440  
 Sweet Cicely 220, 221, 447, 447  
 Sweet Gale 98, 97, 442, 442  
 Sweet Violet 130, 131, 132-3, 443, 443  
*Symphytum officinale* 246, 247-8, 448, 448

## T

*Tanacetum vulgare* 294, 295, 451, 471  
 Tangle 414, 415, 456, 478  
 Tanny 294, 295, 451, 471  
*Taraxacum* species 390, 291-2, 470, 470  
 Thistle: Marsh 282, 282, 450, 470  
 Milk 282, 282, 450, 470  
 Perennial  
 Sow- 286, 287, 450, 470  
*Thlaspi arvense* 143, 143, 444, 444  
 Thyme, Wild 264, 265, 449, 449  
*Thymus* species 264, 265, 449, 449  
*Tilia europaea* 56, 57, 440, 440  
 Tilleul 57  
*Tragopogon porrifolius* 288, 288, 450, 470  
*Tragopogon pratensis* 288, 288, 450, 470  
 trees 28-85 see also under individual  
 tree name  
 Truffle 330, 331, 331, 452, 472  
*Tuber aestivum* 330, 331, 331, 452, 472

## U

*Urtica lactuca* 412, 412, 456, 478  
*Umbilicaria pustulata* 406, 407, 456, 476  
*Urtica dioica* 82, 93-4, 85, 442, 442

## V

*Vaccinium myrtillus* 160-1, 160, 445, 445  
*Vaccinium oxycoccos* 163, 445, 445  
*Vaccinium vitis-idaea* 162, 163, 445, 445  
*Valerianella locusta* 278, 278, 450, 470  
 Velvet Shank 347, 347, 453, 473  
*Vernonia bicolor* 271, 271, 449, 449  
*Viola odorata* 150, 151, 152-3, 443, 443  
 Violet, Sweet 150, 151, 152-3, 443, 443

## W

Walnut 38, 38, 440, 440  
 Water Mint 266, 267, 449, 449  
 Water-cress 136, 137, 444, 444  
 Water-dropwort, the 232, 232, 448, 448  
 White Dead-nettle 254, 255, 449, 449  
 White Mustard 148, 149, 444, 444  
 Whitebeam 72, 72, 441, 441  
 Whorled Mint 268, 449, 449  
 Winkle 426, 426, 456, 476  
 Winter Chanterelle 337, 337  
 Winter Mushroom 347, 347, 453, 473  
 Winter-cress 135, 444, 444  
 Wood Aven 192, 192, 446, 446  
 Wood Blewit 342, 342, 452, 472  
 Wood Hedgehog 338, 338, 452, 472  
 Wood Mushroom 367-8, 367, 368, 454, 474  
 Woodruff 276, 277, 450, 470  
 Wood-sorrel 210, 211, 212-13, 447, 447  
 Woolly Milk Cap 195, 195  
 Wormwood 296, 296, 451, 471

## Y

Yarrow 298, 298, 298, 451, 471  
 Yellow Archangel 154, 155, 449, 449  
 Yellow Swamp Russula 390, 391, 455, 475  
 Yellow-cracked Bolete 380, 381, 454, 474  
 Yellow-staining Mushroom 371, 454, 474



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167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 527, 528, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547, 548, 549, 550, 551, 552, 553, 554, 555, 556, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 571, 572, 573, 574, 575, 576, 577, 578, 579, 580, 581, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 594, 595, 596, 597, 598, 599, 600, 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 615, 616, 617, 618, 619, 620, 621, 622, 623, 624, 625, 626, 627, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634, 635, 636, 637, 638, 639, 640, 641, 642, 643, 644, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 658, 659, 660, 661, 662, 663, 664, 665, 666, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 672, 673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 688, 689, 690, 691, 692, 693, 694, 695, 696, 697, 698, 699, 700, 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 716, 717, 718, 719, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 735, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 751, 752, 753, 754, 755, 756, 757, 758, 759, 760, 761, 762, 763, 764, 765, 766, 767, 768, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 779, 780, 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 796, 797, 798, 799, 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818, 819, 820, 821, 822, 823, 824, 825, 826, 827, 828, 829, 830, 831, 832, 833, 834, 835, 836, 837, 838, 839, 840, 841, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847, 848, 849, 850, 851, 852, 853, 854, 855, 856, 857, 858, 859, 860, 861, 862, 863, 864, 865, 866, 867, 868, 869, 870, 871, 872, 873, 874, 875, 876, 877, 878, 879, 880, 881, 882, 883, 884, 885, 886, 887, 888, 889, 890, 891, 892, 893, 894, 895, 896, 897, 898, 899, 900, 901, 902, 903, 904, 905, 906, 907, 908, 909, 910, 911, 912, 913, 914, 915, 916, 917, 918, 919, 920, 921, 922, 923, 924, 925, 926, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 932, 933, 934, 935, 936, 937, 938, 939, 940, 941, 942, 943, 944, 945, 946, 947, 948, 949, 950, 951, 952, 953, 954, 955, 956, 957, 958, 959, 960, 961, 962, 963, 964, 965, 966, 967, 968, 969, 970, 971, 972, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 978, 979, 980, 981, 982, 983, 984, 985, 986, 987, 988, 989, 990, 991, 992, 993, 994, 995, 996, 997, 998, 999, 1000

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