

Fresh fiddleheads can be sautéed for a simple and delicious spring side dish. SEE RECIPE ON PAGE 49



# DON'T *fiddle* AROUND

The season is short for these magically delectable ferns

By Carol Goodman Kaufman

**M**ore than 11,000 species of ferns cover our planet, but they're not all as feathery as the ones we see in our gardens and on forest footpaths would suggest. They range from the little clover-like marsilea that floats in the waters of South America to the giant Norfolk tree fern that grows as big as, well, a tree in the South Pacific. The myriad types of ferns may be the result of evolution, as they are one of the oldest groups of plants on Earth, having first developed as far back as 430 million years ago. Would Peabody's Wayback Machine even go that far?

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Ferns are known as cryptogams, which means that they bear no flowers, seeds or fruit. So, in ancient times, a mythology grew up around their mysterious asexual propagation. The thinking back then went that if the seeds can't be seen, then they must be invisible. And if they're invisible, then ferns must be magical. Sort of a botanical cloak of invisibility. Take that, Harry Potter. You weren't original.

Scientists hadn't yet discovered the spores that lead to fern reproduction. In fact, it wasn't until 1794 that one John Lindsay (no, not the former mayor of New York) completed the first illustration of the germination of spores.

References to the mystical properties of ferns abound in literature, and not just in fairy tales. The world's literary巨匠s have also incorporated the fern in their works. For example, in William Shakespeare's "Henry IV," he writes of Falstaff, Prince Hal and Poles scheming to rob a rich merchant in the pre-dawn hours. They try to persuade another thief to join them, saying, "We steal as in a castle, cock-sure, we have the receipt of fern-seed, we walk invisible." Their recruit, however, is more inclined to logic and replies that the bandit's invisibility is more likely to be helped by the dark than by any magical seed.

Shakespeare's contemporary, Ben Jonson also writes of the mischievous seed in his comedy "The New Inn, Or, The Light Heart." In that play, the character Perret tells Lovel that "The Lords" have discovered his hiding place, "Because indeed I had no medicine, Sir, to go invisible. No fern-seed in my pocket."

The discovery of spores, however, didn't make a dent in fairy tales. A century after the scientific breakthrough, Danish author Hans Christian Andersen writes in "The Travelling Companion" of both the fern's power of invisibility and its anti-witch properties.

Past forward to the late 20th century and we find references to the mystical properties of ferns in the works of animated movie "FernGully: The Last Rainforest," which features an enchanted rainforest inhabited by fairies.

Ferns definitely make for fascination. But of all the thousands of ferns that carpet the Earth, it is the ostrich variety that provides us with a most delicious treat for the palate: the fiddlehead. Named for its uncanny resemblance to the head of a violin, the fiddlehead is described as tasting like a cross between



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asparagus, green bean and broccoli. And it offers a welcome taste of spring after the long, cold winter.

Ostrich ferns range from Newfoundland to Alaska and British Columbia, south to northern California, the Midwest, and the Southern Appalachians. They are also abundant in the upper Great Lakes, and much of southern Canada.

And they're here in New England, where the time to look for them is anon. Of course, you can always make it easy on yourself and buy them at the local farmers market or greengrocer. But hiking out into damp meadows, riverbanks, or hardwood forests to harvest them is a terrific way to channel your ancestors. And save some money. Of course, if Grandma didn't teach you how to scavenge for the morsels, herein is a simple step-by-step guideline.

Aside from the fresh air and exercise that the adventure provides, fiddleheads are high in vitamins A and C, fiber, as well as omega-3 fatty acids. They're also a good source of potassium and iron.

But before you head out to harvest some of these delectable morsels, it is critically important that you identify the correct ones, as all ferns have a fiddlehead stage. Not all are edible, and some can be downright toxic. Having said that, the ostrich fern that is the target of our quest has three key identifying features:

- A deep, U-shaped groove on the inside of the stem
- A smooth and bright green stem
- Brown, papery scales cover the emerging fiddleheads

Fiddleheads are ready to harvest as they emerge from crowns that have at least four fiddleheads on them. They'll be just a few inches tall and tightly curled. (If you wait until they're taller, you'll be too late. Those little gems will have become full-fledged fronds.) Snap them off by hand or cut them with a knife, about a half-inch to one inch from the coiled head. The fiddleheads that remain will grow into fronds that make food for the next year's crop.

It is vital that you do not over-pick these gems. Leave about half behind so that you'll be sure to have a crop next year.

And be forewarned: The season for enjoying these delicacies is short, so pull on your wiles and head out. This is no time to fiddle around. ■

## SAUTÉED FIDDLEHEAD FERNS

Serves 6

Once you have enough fiddleheads to feed yourself and your dinner guests, preparing them is simple, but do it that same day. It is important to cook them sufficiently, as eating raw or undercooked fiddleheads can cause all manner of gastrointestinal distress.

Ingredients:

- 4 cups fresh fiddlehead ferns
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice, leaving 1 tablespoon aside

Directions:

Bring a large pot of water to boil.

While waiting for the water to boil, remove the brown papery covering from the fiddleheads, trim the ends, and swirl in a bowl of cool water to which 1 T. lemon juice has been added. Cook ferns until barely tender, 7 to 10 minutes. Drain and dry with paper towels.

Heat oil and butter in a large skillet over a medium-high flame.

Add the fiddleheads, garlic, and seasonings and cook, stirring, for about 5 minutes, until browned.

Remove from heat and sprinkle with remaining lemon juice.

Enjoy!