



DANDELIONS, FIDDLEHEAD FERNS & MORE

Central Mass. is a
great place to forage
for wild food

By Carol Goodman Kaufman

We hardy denizens of Central Mass. can proudly boast that we've soldiered through another winter of cold, sometimes frigid, temperatures. But spring is now springing up all over. One of the bonuses of the season is that we don't have to wait for our backyard gardens to produce their bounty. We can forage for a host of wonderful wild foods to be found in the greening countryside.

Now, the term "wild" may have you thinking of the outback of Australia. But no, many delicious edible items can be found growing all over Central Mass. And if the thrill of providing for oneself as our long-ago ancestors isn't enough, foraging can be a fun activity to do with the family.

Fiddlehead ferns
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In search of grape leaves

In our house we love dolmades, and one of our favorite things to do on a bright, sunny day is to head out into the countryside to pick our own wild grape leaves. (Not from a vineyard, as those are far too tough.) The best time to harvest the leaves is from late spring to midsummer, before the fruit ripens and the leaves start to show signs of insect penetration. The grapes themselves are tiny and tart. They can be used to make a nice juice or jelly, but good luck getting to them before the birds do.

Because grapes are woody plants that will cling on anything that will hold them, you can find the vines climbing on fences and trees along country roads, fields, riverbanks and by the side of forest trails. Look for leaves about the size of your palm so that you can stuff them easily and be sure to take only those leaves that you are sure have not been sprayed with pesticides.

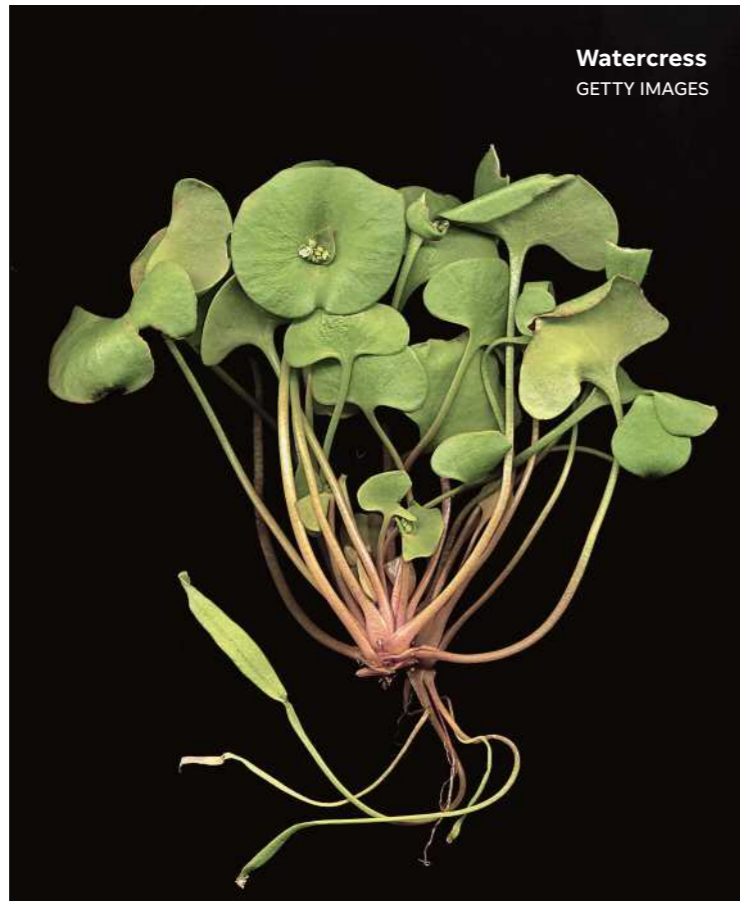
Fiddlehead ferns a favorite

Next up on the spring foraging trek are fiddlehead ferns, the furred fronds of young ostrich ferns that got their name for their uncanny resemblance to the scrolled head of the violin. These delicate greens are typically available for only a very short time in early spring in the Northeast. Of course, you can always find them at a farmers market or your local greengrocer — again, during a very short season. Hiking out into damp meadows and riverbanks, and even in hardwood forests, to harvest them is a terrific way to channel your great-grandmother (and save some money). Of course, if Great-Grandma didn't teach you how to scavenge for the morsels, here is a simple step-by-step guideline.

Before picking a fiddlehead, it is important to make sure that you are choosing the right type of fern, as all ferns have a fiddlehead stage. Picking the wrong one can give you a big tummy ache. Fiddleheads have a few characteristics that distinguish them from their cousins. The bright green ferns grow in a

woody cluster, and you can spot them by searching out the old, brown, past-season dead shoots. The stem is not round; rather, it has a U-shaped groove running down its length. The stem is smooth, not fuzzy, and has a light brown parchment-like paper covering around the fiddlehead that should be shucked before cooking.

Cut them close to the ground or simply snap them off, but if you want to find the stand next year, it is extremely important not to overharvest. Always leave enough for the plants to ensure sustainable harvest; repeated overpicking will eventually kill the plant.



Wild for watercress

Another delicious plant you may find on your country tour is watercress. When you hear the word “watercress,” you may immediately think of afternoon tea on the lawn at Downton Abbey, with its tiny sandwiches and scones with clotted cream. At least I do. But watercress is actually a wild edible plant that not only has many uses but also boasts loads of vitamins and minerals.

And it grows in our area. You can find this crunchy and peppery green wherever cold, alkaline water flows, such as in streams and ponds. It even grows at

the edge of marshes and on muddy riverbanks. Watercress grows year-round, but you will harvest the best mild and tender leaves in springtime.

Check for chicory

As you continue your wanderings through the countryside, you may well admire the masses of purple flowers that line the edges of roads. And while they make for a lovely display in a vase, those lavender blossoms sit atop the chicory plant. What you may not know is that the chicory's flowers, leaves and roots are all edible. The baby leaves in early spring are great in salads, while leaves harvested in late summer and early fall, called chicory hearts, are also good. If picked at the latter time, take care to pull off the tough outer leaves of the plant, using only the tender inner ones.

And if you've ever been to New Orleans, you may have enjoyed coffee with chicory (and a beignet or two) at the city's iconic Café du Monde. That chicory comes from the root of the very same plant that provides your salad greens.

I wouldn't advise picking the chicory plants along well-traveled roads, as they will have absorbed rock salt, to say nothing of the noxious fumes spewed by passing cars. Look for an unsprayed field to harvest your chicory.

On the lookout for ramps

To add to your salad bowl, ramps should definitely be on your foraging list. Also known as wild leeks, these cousins of onion and garlic have a peppery and pungent flavor. Ramps grow in rich, well-drained soil in hardwood forests, particularly near water sources such as along vernal ponds, swamps and stream banks.

It's important when picking ramps to do so ethically and not to overharvest one spot. According to the USDA, the way to harvest ramps sustainably is to cut only one leaf and leave the bulb and second leaf to continue growing. If you leave some of the bottom of the bulb and the roots in the ground, the ramps have a

better chance of growing back. And you will have a crop next spring.

Spruce tips close to home

If you're more inclined to stick closer to home, there's still more treasure to be found in your own backyard. Around the end of May, long after the strings of blinking Christmas lights have been taken down, the spruce trees in your yard can provide a surprising gift of lemony, herby tang to your menu, by way of spruce tips. The new, young tips on the tree's branches are easy to spot, as they are softer and lighter in color than older needles, and they have brown, paper-like casings. Spruce tips can either be cooked or eaten raw as snacks, such as in trail mix. They can also be steeped for use as a tea or used in salads, soups or casseroles.

Flower power

If your backyard is anything like mine, there's a bevy of purple beauties popping up come springtime: violets. And while many of my friends consider these plants to be weeds and yank them out of the ground at first sight, let's take a moment to learn about other uses for this plant whose leaves and flowers are edible from early to midspring. Those pretty blooms aren't just suitable for candied violets for decorating cupcakes. The freshly picked flowers have a sweet, floral flavor that is lovely in a salad. Violet leaves can also be used in salads, sandwiches and even as an ingredient in pesto. They are best in early spring, when they are young and tender.

Violet blooms are also the star ingredient in a syrup that is wonderful when added to everything from buttercream frosting to homemade ice cream. And, of course, the deep purple liquid is a valuable addition to cocktails or other beverages like lemonade.

And then there's the dandelion. While considered an irritation for many if not most homeowners with a lawn, I prefer to think of this weed as simply a flower growing in the wrong place. Dandelions could, after all, be growing in

your garden bed, providing greens for your salad. (I actually planted some indoors a few years ago.) Pick them early — and again, in a pesticide-free zone — when they are young and tender. You can use both the leaves and the flowers in numerous recipes. They're great in salads, battered and fried in fritters, as an infusion for oil, and for tea.

There's even a dandelion syrup. Up north of the Arctic Circle, cooks prepare a recipe that requires 300 dandelion heads, along with lots of sugar. While some describe it as having pleasantly sweet flavor to use over ice cream, waffles and pancakes, my daughter says



that it tastes more like Ricola cough drops.

Expert assistance

Foraging is a fun outdoor activity, but if you don't feel comfortable hunting and gathering on your own, you can sign up for an organized wild-food foraging experience. In Massachusetts, we are blessed to have two experts.

A now-retired environmental lawyer, Russ Cohen has been leading “Edible Wild Plant/Mushroom Walks and Talks” for 50 years and has earned multiple awards for his work both in river stew-

ardship and wild-edibles instruction. He leads participants through rural areas throughout the state, searching for plants to eat while educating his audience about them. He also provides snacks made from his finds. I enjoyed several, including a scrumptious baklava-like pastry made from black walnuts, and a fruit leather made from the berries of the invasive autumn olive.

Russ Cohen's 2025 schedule can be accessed at users.rcn.com/eatwild/sched.htm, but check back frequently for updates. He may be coming to a place near you. The website also provides a link to recorded tours from 2024.

Closer to home is Millbury-based Rachel Goclawski, a state-certified educator in mushrooming and a programming partner with the Museum of Natural History. Rachel grew up foraging with a grandmother who taught her about the flowers, herbs and berries to be found in the wild. When she grew up and had her own children, she wanted to continue the tradition enjoying nature. “It's like a treasure hunt,” she said.

But she didn't learn about mushrooms. Although that grandmother was the daughter of Dr. Arthur W. Fairbanks, one of the founding members of the Boston Mycological Club in 1895, she was traumatized when one of her father's fellow mycologists died after consuming a toxic mushroom. She refused to teach Rachel anything about them. It was Rachel's great-aunt who taught her how to identify edible mushrooms. She includes mushroom foraging in her offerings today.

As a complement to the foraging treks, Rachel also offers classes on preparing the harvested plants. Although children were her first students, their parents soon began asking for classes, so the program has expanded.

You can reach Rachel Goclawski through her Facebook page facebook.com/cookingwithmrsg.

From city backyards to country fields and streams, Central Mass. is a treasure trove of wonderful and delicious edible plants to try and enjoy, so pull on your wellies and get out there!

Wild Rice-Stuffed Grape Leaves

6 tablespoons olive oil

1 onion, chopped

$\frac{2}{3}$ cup long grain and wild rice mixture

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ground allspice

$1\frac{1}{2}$ cups water

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup dried currants

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup pine nuts

50 fresh wild grape leaves (or use store-bought)

1 cup water

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup fresh lemon juice

Fresh lemon wedges

Chopped fresh parsley

Heat 2 tablespoons oil in heavy medium saucepan over medium heat.

Add onion and sauté until tender, about 5 minutes.

Add rice and allspice and stir 30 seconds.

Add $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups water and currants and bring to boil.

Reduce heat to low, cover and simmer until water is absorbed and rice is tender, about 20 minutes. Remove from heat.

Heat 1 tablespoon oil in heavy small skillet over medium-low heat.

Add pine nuts and sauté until golden brown, about 6 minutes.

Mix nut mixture into rice.

Season with salt and pepper.

Bring large pot of water to boil. Add grape leaves and stir to separate.

Turn off heat; let stand 1 minute.

Drain. Rinse with cold water to cool; drain well.

Cover bottom of heavy large skillet or Dutch oven with about 10 grape leaves, pressing about 2 inches up sides of pot.

Arrange 1 leaf, vein side up, on work surface.

Place 1 rounded tablespoon rice filling near stem.

Fold in sides, then roll into little cigars.

Repeat with remaining filling and leaves.

Arrange stuffed leaves, seam side down, close together in leaf-lined pot.



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Drizzle 3 tablespoons oil over all.

Add 1 cup water and lemon juice.

Bring to boil.

Reduce heat to medium-low, cover and cook 50 minutes.

Cool completely.

(These can be made 1 day ahead. Cover and refrigerate.)

Arrange stuffed grape leaves on platter. Garnish with lemon and parsley. ■