

Foraging for Wild Medicinals (6 Plants to Start With)

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Foraging is looking for looking for and harvesting food from the wild, this can include herbs, fruit, nuts, mushrooms and even some forms of insects or shellfish.

Think back to early mankind, we were nomadic tribes of hunters and gatherers, foraging is basically the same thing. Early humans lived off of food that they found and hunted before we started farming and planting our own food.

Why Should You Forage?

There are so many great reasons to forage for medicinal and edible plants, the first one being it's free! Seeds are not expensive, and plant starts aren't too bad either, but free is even better than cheap. Plants found in the wild can also contain more nutrients than store-bought plants.

Foraging is also much more sustainable than buying herbs that need to be shipped or flown to your location. And in the case of an emergency, having knowledge of plants that can feed you and treat your ailments can be a game-changer.



Disclaimer

This information is for entertainment purposes only and is not intended to make any medical claim, diagnose, treat or cure any disease. Please consult your physician before taking any herbs or supplements. Readers must do their own research concerning the safety and usage of any herbs or supplements.

Disclosure: This post has affiliate links, so I may get a commission if you buy through those links. See [my full disclosure](#) for more.

Foraging Equipment

You will want to be prepared if you are going out to forage, and it is good practice to keep a few foraging tools in your vehicle just in case you find yourself in an emergency situation, or if you happen to stumble upon a patch of plants that you want to harvest.

- Field guides. Even if you have a plant identifying app, an actual book can be invaluable for identifying plants while foraging.
- Gloves.
- Breathable bags. Regular brown paper bags are my go-to when storing harvested herbs. They are great for transporting cut herbs, and you can leave them in the bag if you plan on drying them before use. Mesh bags are also a good option for storing your herbs on the way home.
- Compact shovel. This helps dig up roots, and there are several foldable options for easy storage.
- Pruning shears.
- Knife.
- Appropriate clothing: a hat to protect yourself from the sun, good hiking boots, and long sleeves to protect your arms if you brush across stinging nettles or thorny bushes.

Foraging Tips

Next, I will cover some basic guidelines you should follow to keep yourself safe, and make sure the plants you are foraging are safe to eat.

Avoid Areas That May Be Polluted or Toxic

It may seem obvious, but some areas have ground contamination from pollution, pesticides, or runoff that you want to avoid foraging in. In general, you should try to stay away from plants that are growing close to busy roads.

There is a lot of conflicting information out there regarding how close is too close, but a general guideline is **at least 50-100 yards from a busy road**. When I am foraging, I try to get as far from the road as I can.

Railroad tracks, industrial sites, and areas around sidewalks are also places to avoid when foraging.

Know What Plant You're Foraging

You will discover there are many look-alikes when you start trying to identify wild plants. Picking the wrong plant could be a harmless mistake, or in some cases, it could be a fatal one. ***Do not ingest a plant unless you are 100% sure of its identity.***

You can double-check with books, one of the many plant identifying available apps, or if you know anyone who is experienced at foraging, join them on some plant walks to identify your local flora. And while you should develop a sense of confidence, never get too confident.

There are many stories of experienced foragers who still made deadly mistakes. **Don't be afraid but always double-check**, even if you think you know what the plant is.

Only Take What You Need

To keep foraging areas healthy and abundant year after year, it is important that you only take what you need, and not exhaust all the resources in the area.

You want to harvest from healthy plants, but you don't want to take all of the plant. Leave some to reseed so that the next generation is from the healthiest plants around. A general rule is to take 5% of a patch of any plant.

The best time to forage for roots is in the autumn after the plant has already gone to seed. When harvesting flowers, leave some behind to go to seed.

Visit the Same Places Often

Visiting the same foraging area in different seasons will help you with plant identification. **A plant's appearance changes through the season**, so knowing what it looks like in each stage can help prevent misidentification.

Know when to Harvest Each Part

There are different rules for each plant, but in general, root medicine is best harvested in the fall, flowers are best harvested a week or so after blooming and after the dew has dried, and leaves are harvested in the spring or summer.

Get Permission

If you are harvesting or foraging on private land, make sure you obtain permission from the landowners. If you are on public land, make sure you are aware of any restrictions or permits you may need.

There can be some restrictions on certain plants, so find and contact the appropriate local, state, or federal office if you are unsure.

Top 6 Easiest Plants to Forage

There are so many plants to choose from when wild foraging and the availability of different plants will vary depending on the area where you live and are exploring. These are just a few of the more common plants in North America to get you started.



Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)

This isn't the fanciest or most exciting plant around, but it is one of the most abundant and easily recognizable. Almost everyone knows what a dandelion is and you don't have to go far to find them.

Dandelions are dual-purpose, both medicinal and edible, they are the enemy of suburban lawns everywhere but the best friend of the wild forager.

Dandelion is so versatile that pretty much every part of the plant can be used, leaves, flowers, and roots! Dandelion is very high in vitamins and minerals including Vitamins A, C, and D, and contains Iron, Calcium, Potassium, and Magnesium.

The leaves can be eaten fresh in a salad or steeped into a tea for its beneficial health properties. The flowers can be eaten right off the plant, and many enjoy roasted dandelion root as a coffee supplement.

The flowers can be added to salad, fried, made into wine or juice, or infused into vinegar. Dandelion can also be made into a tincture or an infused oil.

Dandelion is an herb that is considered safe for the liver, it is a diuretic that is high in potassium, and it's known to help assist painful joints, high blood pressure, and digestive problems.



broadleaf plantain

Plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*, *P. major*)

Plantain is another plant ally that is widely dispersed and available in North America. There are two types of plantain: Greater plantain (*Plantago major*), and narrow leaf plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*). Both can be used for their medicinal purposes.

Plantain grows low to the ground, and has broad leaves that sprout directly from the soil. If it is left to sprout it will grow long, thin stalks with tiny flowers.

Plantain is a great field remedy for cuts, bites, stings, or ulcers when applied topically, and relieves the pain almost instantly. The narrow leaf variety tends to be better for this, its leaves are easily crushed and applied, Greater plantain will work too but the leaves can sometimes be tougher.



long-leaf plantain

You can make a simple poultice from the leaves, and apply it to the skin to relieve pain and draw out any dirt or infections that may settle into a wound. You can also make a salve.

Narrow leaf Plantain also has some success in treating coughs that are hot and dry. The small new leaves of plantain can be eaten in salads, although they can be bitter and tough.

Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*)

Red clover is great for elimination, it can move toxins through the whole body by increasing urine flow, acting as a gentle laxative, moving mucus from the lungs, and increasing bile flow. It is also an expectorant, and can be used to assist coughs, asthma, and bronchitis, not to mention it may protect neurons from certain toxins.



Red clover is also good for irritated skin conditions and can be used as a poultice to treat wounds or skin lesions. It may be of benefit to relieve symptoms of menopause as well.

A word of caution though; Red Clover is a blood thinner, so if you are taking any blood-thinning medications it is probably best to avoid red clover.

Red clover blooms can be harvested one to two weeks after they bloom, if you want the blossoms to retain their red color, harvest them while they still have dew. It can be made into tea, salve, as a tincture, or in a poultice, and it can also be used to make flour.

Curled Dock, Curly Dock or Yellow Dock (*Rumex crispus*)

There are many species of Dock in North America. Dock has a flowering stem that can reach 3 feet in height and has dull green elongated leaves. It is found along roadsides, at the edges of fields, and along riverbanks.



curly dock

The most commonly used part of Curly Dock is the long taproot of this plant, it is used to treat anemia and menstrual issues because it helps the body better absorb iron. It also has a laxative effect and has been used as a detoxifier for the liver.

The roots can also be ground up and made into flour, the leaves can be cooked and eaten as a vegetable, or in a soup. The raw leaves contain oxalic acid which can be toxic if too much is eaten, so it's best to cook your leaves before eating them.

When harvesting roots, the best time is after it has grown to its full size. Fall is the best time to dig roots because spring and fall are when most of the energy of the plant is in the roots.

The root can be made into vinegar, tincture, syrup, or boiled into a decoction.



cattails

Cattails (*Typha latifolia*)

Cattails are easily recognizable and are a beneficial source of food and medicine in the wild. When foraging for cattails, make sure to harvest plants that have moving water around them rather than stagnant.

Cattails naturally filter pollutants from the water they are in, and these pollutants are then stored in the plant so you want to make sure the body of water they are in isn't stagnant and polluted.

Cattail roots can be used as a poultice, the jelly-like substance in the leaves can be used to ease pain, clean wounds, or stop an itch. Both the roots and stems can be used to reduce fever, and as a diuretic.

Cattails are rich in vitamins A, B, and C and also contain potassium. You can harvest flour from the root of the cattail and the pollen can be used as an addition to flour as well, many people are fond of adding the pollen to a pancake mix, or to make stir fry. As a bonus, the seed of the cattail can be used as kindling to start a fire.

Make sure you are harvesting mature cattails; they are unmistakable in appearance however the younger stalks do have some toxic look-alikes.



mullein

Mullein (*Verbascum spp.*)

Mullein can be found in gravelly roadsides or garden soil, and prefers full sun. It takes two years for mullein to complete its life cycle. It has a rosette of silvery green and fuzzy leaves, and by the second year, it grows a long stalk of yellow flowers that can reach almost 6 feet (1.8 meters) in height.

Mullein is well known for its ability to soothe the respiratory system; it is beneficial for easing coughs and soothes irritation and dryness. It is specifically effective for dry coughs. It is also helpful for joint pain due to rheumatism.

Mullein flower is popular as a remedy for earaches, and can be infused into an oil for that purpose.

Leaves, roots, and flowers can be formulated into teas or tinctures, and the leaves can also be applied as a poultice. Roots can be used in decoctions as well, and the flowers can be infused into oil.

The leaves can be very hairy, so it is best to use gloves when foraging, especially if you are harvesting large amounts.

Other Things to Consider

Many foragers keep a journal to track what plants they have foraged, where they found them, what time of year is best for harvesting, which plants grow next to each other, etc.

It is good to learn about different types of plants that like to grow next to each other, often called *companion plants*. That way, you know if you see Curly dock you should look around for pokeweed since they often grow near each other. You can also consider planting some of your favorite wild edibles in your garden, and cultivating your own patch.

It can be very helpful to learn the Latin names of the plants around you, one plant can go by many different common names and confusion can occur.

Plant Identification Resources

There are a multitude of books and plant identification apps to choose from, this is a list of some of the top rated ones

Books

- [Backyard Medicine](#) by Julie Bruton-Seal and Matthew Seal
- [The Forager's Harvest: A Guide to Identifying, Harvesting, and Preparing Edible Wild Plants](#) by Samuel Thayer
- [Complete Guide to Edible Wild Plants, Mushrooms, Fruits, and Nuts: How to Find, Identify, and Cook Them](#) by Katie Letcher Lyle

Plant Identification Apps

- Garden Answers ([iOS](#), [Android](#))
- PlantNet ([iOS](#), [Android](#))
- I Naturalist ([iOS](#), [Android](#))
- Leaf Snap ([iOS](#), [Android](#))

Have Fun

Wildcrafting is not only an enjoyable way to learn about the plants in your area, but it can be beneficial to the local ecosystem if done correctly, and you will find a larger variety of foods to try than you would in your supermarket... not to mention the confidence you will gain from knowing that you can find medicine and food to sustain yourself during hard times.



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