



WILD food

Fergus 'the Forager' Drennan is attempting to live for a year entirely from foraged foods. He runs wonderful courses on wild foods and foraging (not always the same thing) throughout the year and more details are available on his website at www.wildmanwildfood.com

Candid about candy!

Fergus Drennan can't contain his enthusiasm for something sweet and succulent!

I'm sure there's a gorgeous lady out there somewhere named Candy whom I could fall head-over-heels in love with but, on this occasion, I'm yet again referring to my sweet tooth, aka love/addiction to sugar and, hence, the sugar preserving (candying) of various wild food plants. There's vast scope for experimentation in this regard. Here I want to concentrate on the technique as traditionally used, as well as in a few experimental ways I've been successful with. To that end this

article will explore how to candy the following wild, and not so wild, ingredients: rose hips, chestnuts, Alexanders, angelica and coltsfoot stems, sea holly and fennel roots, green figs, green and red blackberries, as well as incorporating many of these ingredients into mincemeat for some really unique alternatives to the conventional Christmas mince pie.

Using sugar, in this case sugar syrup, is a fun and easy way to preserve certain wild foods for adding unusual colours, textures and flavours to various drinks, desserts, cakes, biscuits and even savoury dishes. One can use white sugar, brown sugar, honey or various combinations. The resulting syrups, in addition, can also be flavoured. Here, I'm just going to stick to the basics. For each item candied, the amount of sugar required is the same weight as that of the prepared wild food.



Selection of candied wild/foraged foods. Clockwise from top: chestnuts, Alexanders stems, green figs, sea holly roots, rose hips; centre: green and red blackberries.



Candied rose hips

Select only large and still entirely hard scarlet-coloured dog rose hips or similar – many will have softened by now but, even so, many will still be hard and firm as late as January. Where one bush has completely soft hips the ones next to it can still be firm and hard so it pays to look around.

10oz (300g) halved, deseeded and dehaired dog rose hips
10oz (300g) granulated white sugar
Water to cover by 2cm

METHOD

Wash, then top and tail the hips to remove any stalk and the small black disk at the top. The quickest way to prepare them is to cut each one in half with a carving knife and scrape the seeds out with the rounded tip of a cutlery knife. Place in a colander and wash thoroughly under cold running water for a few minutes to remove any remaining fine seed hairs. Proceed to candy immediately – don't leave till the next day once cut or they will go soft. Place in a pan with the water and simmer for 10 minutes before adding and dissolving in the sugar.

Simmer for five minutes and leave to stand for 12 hours or overnight (in pan or separate bowl – making sure the hips are covered with syrup).

Next morning, strain off the sugar syrup and simmer to reduce a little. Add rose hips and simmer for a further minute. Leave for another 12 hrs. Repeat process three times (so four times altogether). You should be left with a little thick but runny syrup (be very careful here and in all the following candying recipes not to overheat the syrup on the 4th reduction and thus set or caramelize it).

Candied sweet chestnuts (marrons glacé)

1lb (450g) chestnuts, shells removed
1lb (450g) granulated sugar
Water to cover by 2cm
½ vanilla pod

METHOD

In a large saucepan, cover chestnuts with water to 2cm (3/4") above them. Bring to a boil. Boil for five minutes. Remove the chestnuts and rub off the brown inner skins using a tea towel. Add the sugar and the vanilla pod to the water. Stir until the sugar dissolves, then simmer for five minutes. Add

the chestnuts, increase the heat and boil for five minutes.

Remove the vanilla pod. Leave to stand (in a pan or separate bowl) for 12 hours. Boil for one minute, then leave to stand for 12 hours. Repeat this process three times until syrup has been mostly absorbed.



Alexanders, angelica and coltsfoot stems

Suitable Alexanders (*Smyrniolum olusatrum*) stems can be obtained from November through to June, angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*) from April-July and coltsfoot (*Tussilago farfara*) from late December- April (Note: due to coltsfoot's pyrrolizidine alkaloid content in the leaf and therefore probably the stem, do not eat on a regular basis).

Proceed as for rosehips although only boil the stems in the water for 2-5 minutes to tenderize first, and each time you boil in the syrup do so for only a minute to prevent them going too soft. The Alexanders and angelica stems may need peeling after the initial simmer. For the Alexanders, try to get as much of the tender white stem as possible when collecting. That will involve pushing your cutting knife down into the soil to cut the stem below the ground.

For the Alexanders, also collect a small bag of ripe seeds (approx 10g), slightly crush, tie in muslin and add to the syrup each time you simmer it. Reserve the Alexanders syrup for the drink recipe below.

Sea holly, fennel and Alexanders roots

For these roots simply scrub and cut into pencil-thick strips and then candy separately. The sea holly (*Eryngium planum*) won't need cutting along its length, the fennel may do, and the Alexanders probably will, as it can get to the size of a large parsnip – scrub the latter until the thin black outer skin is removed. Then proceed as for rose hips above.



Alexanders roots.

Green figs

Select hard, firm unripe figs 1-2 inches long that would otherwise go to waste, cut into quarters and wash to remove any loose inside bits. Proceed as for rose hips.



Alexanders: found near the coast and places of former Roman strongholds such as York. Use bottom 10cm or so of stem.



Angelica found in the spring. This must be distinguished from the poisonous and superficially similar looking hemlock waterdropwort.



Sea holly and roots.

Green and red blackberries

Select these usually ignored remnants of autumn which will now no longer ripen. Remove any stalk and calyx, and wash to remove fine hairs. Keeping the berries whole, proceed as for rosehips, although do not boil the berries in the water first, and each time you boil in the syrup do so for only a minute to prevent them going too soft.

All of the above can be bottled in their syrup after the third syrup reduction or, except for the eryngoes and chestnuts, turned into jam.

To finish as candies, preheat oven to 50°C (120°F, gas lowest heat). Cover a wire rack with parchment paper. Place items without them touching each other on the paper and bake with the oven door open for 2-4 hours or until firm (or use a food dehydrator). Remove from oven. Cool and store in airtight containers or use in the following recipe.



Sea holly in its natural coastal habitat.

Sea Holly roots, as sugar-preserved 'eryngoes' were a traditional Victorian candy.

It can be hard to gain permission to dig for these roots (on their usual coastal shingle and sand dune habitat), but these plants, along with the others, can be easily grown at home. Select plants in their first year of growth or early in their second year.



Wild Things mincemeat



Makes 5lb (2.2kg)

- 1lb (450g) sharp tasting wild apples, dwarf quince windfalls or Bramleys, peeled, cored and finely chopped
- 8oz (225g) shredded suet
- 8oz (225g) candied rose hips, finely chopped
- 6oz (175g) raisins
- 4oz (115g) candied eryngoes, finely chopped (or carrot as a substitute)
- 4oz (115g) sultanas
- 4oz (115g) candied green figs, finely chopped
- 4oz (115g) currants
- 6oz (175g) whole mixed candied peel, finely chopped
- 4 oz (115g) finely chopped candied sweet chestnuts
- 5oz (140g) soft dark brown sugar
- Grated zest and juice 2 oranges
- Grated zest and juice 2 lemons
- 4 level tsp mixed ground spice
- ½ level tsp ground cinnamon
- ½ level tsp freshly grated nutmeg
- 6 tbsp brandy

METHOD

Together or separately use a food processor to break up the figs, rose hips, eryngoes and chestnuts or manually finely chop, then combine all ingredients, except the brandy, in a large mixing bowl and stir to thoroughly mix together. So the flavours have a chance to infuse and develop, cover the bowl and leave the mixture in a cool place for about 12 hours or overnight. Pre-heat the oven to 110°C (225°F, gas ¼). Cover the bowl with foil and place it in the oven for four hours, then remove to cool stirring from time to time as the fat content sets. When cold thoroughly stir in the brandy.

If you wish to put some by, pack into sterilised jars, cover with waxed discs and seal, storing in a cool, dark place.

For individual mince pies, make the pastry and pies according to a standard recipe however substitute 25% of the wheat flour for sweet chestnut flour if you have it. Decorate with miniature pastry leaves and small candied red blackberries or rose hip halves.



Alexanders liqueur slush

- 1lb (450g) Alexanders – mostly stem, but some leaf
- 3-4 tbsp Alexanders syrup (from candying recipe – make a little extra when doing that)
- Vodka – about 1 litre

METHOD

Wash the Alexanders and shake dry. Liquidise with the vodka to a purée, and squeeze all liquid out using a clean pillowcase. Pour through a coffee filter in a plastic funnel to drip straight into the bottle you wish to keep it in.

Add the syrup to the bottle and shake. Taste and add additional sugar if desired. To serve, crush some ice in a coffee grinder, fill a glass and pour on the Alexander liqueur. This is adapted from John Wright's lovely little book *The Edible Seashore*. I told him how impressed I was with this as, over the years, I've put virtually every wild food I can think of experimentally into vodka or gin but, for some reason, had never thought to try this!

