



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

Stalking season

Great wild food ideas have countless sources, says **Fergus Drennan**, but many stem from... well, the stem!

Springtime and, in particular, the months of April and May present a unique opportunity to make use of a vast array of differently flavoured and textured plant stems. At other times these stems would either be totally absent, too tough, or dried out.

The list below includes the ones I commonly use, representing plants which, for the most part, are themselves fairly common. The flavours range from mild – members of the daisy family, to strong and distinct – most members of the carrot family, to bracingly pungent – a few members of the cabbage family. Any part of the dittander plant, for instance – root, stem, leaf or flower – can make your eyes water in response to its robust mustardy-horseradish wasabi flavour! These more pungent stems are best chopped finely and added to all kinds of salads, tempura-ed (is there such a word?) or pickled.

Spear thistle *Cirsium vulgare*
Daisy/Asteraceae family: Firm, refreshing, succulent solid stem. Needs peeling.

Sea aster *Aster tripolium*
Daisy/Asteraceae family: Very solid aromatic stem; no need to peel.

Burdock *Arctium minus* and *A. lappa*
Daisy/Asteraceae family: Thick, solid, firm, mild, delicious, versatile. Needs peeling.



Cut burdock stems. Best at the end of April through May, before reaching up to two feet long.

Bristly ox-tongue *Picris echinoides*
Daisy/Asteraceae family: Mild, refreshing, solid, crunchy texture. Needs peeling.



Bristly ox-tongue. One of my favourite stems. Alas too early (January) to photograph it with stem. Harvest up to waist height.

Smooth sow thistle *Sonchus oleraceus*
Daisy/Asteraceae family: Hollow, slightly bitter, soak before use. No need to peel.



Sow thistle ripe for stuffing. It could be a little bigger, ideally.

Alexanders *Smyrniolus atrum*
Carrot/Apiaceae family: Full-flavoured, solid when young, then hollow. Needs peeling.



Alexanders just come into flower. Ideally collect before flowering or the stem will be too tough.

Hogweed *Heracleum sphondylium*
Carrot/Apiaceae family: Use young leaf stems, not central stem; mildly aromatic. No need to peel. Cook.



Hogweed leaf stems, not the flowering stem.



Lacto-fermenting hogweed. Note loose-fitting lid with the seal removed.

Fennel *Foeniculum vulgare*
Carrot/Apiaceae family: Aniseed flavour. Solid when young. No need to peel.

Lady's smock *Cardamine loxostemonoides*
Cabbage/Cruciferae family: Thin, pungent, no need to peel.



Lady's smock or Cuckoo flower.

Dittander *Lepidium latifolium*
Cabbage/Cruciferae family: Solid, hot mustard flavour, no need to peel.



Dittander

Sea kale *Crambe maritima*
Cabbage/Cruciferae family: Firm, solid, cabbage flavour, only peel after flowers begin opening.



Sea kale. Use the stalk but don't waste the young still faintly purple leaves (older, entirely green leaves are very bitter) or the unopened flower heads.

Garlic mustard *Alliaria petiolata*
Cabbage/Cruciferae family: Solid, mild garlic-mustard-cheese flavour. No need to peel.



Garlic mustard. Before and just after it flowers, the top 6" of stem can be eaten, including flowers

Broad-leaved dock *Rumex obtusifolius*
Dock/Polygonaceae family: Solid, refreshing lemon-citrus flavour. Needs peeling.

Japanese knotweed *Polygonum japonicum*
Dock/Polygonaceae family: Solid, acidic flavour. Needs peeling once over 12" (30cm).



Japanese knotweed, at the 'alien asparagus' stage.

Wild asparagus *Asparagus officinalis*
Lily/Liliaceae family: Asparagus flavour, of course. Solid. No need to peel.

Reed-mace *Typha latifolia* and *T. angustifolia*
Dry cucumber/watermelon flavour. Needs peeling.

Bulrush/Typhaceae family:
Dry cucumber/watermelon flavour. Needs peeling.

Blackberry *Rubus fruticosus*
Rose/Rosaceae family: Shoots off main stem. Best cooked in a change of water.

Hop *Humulus lupulus*
Hemp/Cannabaceae family: Top 2-3" (5-7cm) of shoot. No need to peel. Cook.

Consult a good wildflower guide for precise habitat information and identification. Alternatively, my old business partner Miles Irving's excellent *The Forager Handbook* has a wealth of such info, and much more.

N.B. Although some people recommend eating hogweed shoots raw, I advise extreme caution as the sap can cause blistering of the skin if it is subsequently exposed to direct sunlight. But don't be put off by this as it is a truly delicious vegetable and completely benign when cooked!

Lacto-fermenting

In a previous issue (June 2009) I covered pickling – including stems. Another preserving technique that opens up a whole world of flavours is lacto-fermentation. The length of the preservation period will depend on the quality of the ingredients, the amount of salt used, and how the ready-to-use finished product is stored. I have two-year-old jars of sauerkrauted fennel and seakale in the fridge that taste fine.

Stems can be peeled (if necessary), chopped, placed in a jar between alternate layers of salt and pressed down so they are covered by their extracted juices – follow a basic sauerkraut recipe, except use wild stems. Alternatively a more versatile – because less salty – traditional Polish method can be followed that will work very well with burdock, Japanese knotweed, seakale, fennel and hogweed shoots. So, for example, loosely fill a hot sterilized jar with hogweed shoots, cover with boiling water and add a

teaspoon of salt. When warm, tighten the lid and shake to dissolve/disperse the salt. Loosen the lid and place the jar in an airing cupboard for two to three days (depending on the temperature). It will become cloudy with a few bubbles, smelling and tasting slightly sour – but not gone off. This can then be used in salads or with cold meats, or incorporated into a traditional Polish borsch. It will keep in the fridge for two to three weeks.



Barszcz Polski

Adapted from a recipe by Steve Kirk in *The Bushcraft Magazine*.

600ml (1pt) vegetable stock
1 medium onion, finely chopped
100g (3 1/2 oz) wild garlic leaves, finely chopped
50g (1 3/4 oz) nettles, roughly chopped
50g (1 3/4 oz) Polish sausage, thinly sliced
1 medium Kilner jar of lacto-fermented hogweed and liquid
1 medium-sized potato, peeled and chopped
50g (1 3/4 oz) pickled jelly ear fungus, cut into thin strips

METHOD

Place all the ingredients in a saucepan, except the potato and fungus. Simmer for 15 minutes. Add the potato and simmer for another 15 minutes. Roughly liquidize, add the fungus, reheat and serve.

Experiment with other stems. I have successfully adapted this using the lacto-fermented stems of reedmace, sea aster, burdock, alexanders, seakale, Japanese knotweed and bristly ox-tongue, some benefiting from being served with cream or sour cream.

Butcher's broom coffee

Roasted asparagus seeds make a good coffee substitute but better still in my opinion are the roasted seeds of the related plant *Ruscus aculeatus* or butcher's broom. The plant can be found in dry woodland in small clumps, the female plants producing berries all year. Sometimes it is used as a hedging plant. I collect all my berries from the centre of town! It is inevitable that you will get pricked by the firm spiky leaves, but at least they don't sting like nettles – gloves are hopeless as they adversely affect your dexterity.

METHOD

Collect about 500g (1lb 2oz) of fully ripened red berries (do not eat them raw or cooked), boil for 10 minutes, then mash and rinse in a sieve. Pick out the seeds and roast them on a tray in the oven at 200°C (400°F, gas 6) for up to one hour or until dark brown – not black. Move them around halfway through roasting if

your oven doesn't cook evenly. Grind to a fine powder and make the coffee in a cafetiere using one heaped dessertspoonful per cup. I was so keen to try this the first time I made it that in my impatience I smashed my cafetiere!



Stem foraging

When harvesting the stems of these plants it is more important than usual to gather only a small percentage of the plants in a particular area, the reason being that taking the central flowering stem means that, for most of these plants, there will be no possibility of flowering and, hence, producing seed for the next generation. Of course, that's not such a big issue with those that are perennial. In any case, be vigilant. For some plants the opportunity to harvest stems lasts no longer than two weeks.

The easiest way to prepare and eat any of these stems is simply to munch them there and then when you encounter them out walking, nevertheless they do lend themselves well to the following uses in particular:

- whole stems eaten raw as a crudité starter, dipped in various dipping sauces – much nicer than celery
- pickled and served with cold meats or in green salads
- lacto-fermented and used like pickles
- grated and/or finely sliced and turned into coleslaw, made into a finely chopped mixed stem cold raw salad, or added to tabbouleh/rice salads
- stuffed like cannelloni (Alexanders and large sow thistles)
- shallow- or deep-fried, with or without first dipping in batter – indeed, all those that would otherwise need peeling can be deep- or shallow-fried without peeling, the cooked insides being sucked out as you pull the stem between your front teeth
- and finally, of course, they can be used as side vegetables raw or cooked. Burdock is the best for this as it is so thick and substantial, but any of these stems peeled, where necessary, boiled for two to three minutes and tossed in butter, seasoned and served with a squeeze of lemon juice are delicious.

Other great things to try:

Alexanders 'cannelloni' with blue cheese and St George's mushrooms

Sometimes, you can find Alexanders stems that you can fit your thumb inside. These are excellent peeled and alternately stuffed with blue cheese and mushrooms, covered in good tomato sauce and baked for 30 minutes.

Sow thistle sushi

Similarly, very large sow thistle stems can be soaked in lemon water overnight then stuffed with sushi rice mixed with dulse seaweed and served cold with a suitable dipping sauce.

Dittander and sweetcorn fritters

Chop the stems, add the sweetcorn, and mix with egg, flour and seasoning. Spoon out into a frying pan and shallow-fry on both sides until just browning. A great accompaniment to any meal. Alas no pictures, I'm afraid, as it's impossible to photograph these at the time of writing (January)!

Coleslaw

200g (7oz) of the following five wild ingredients:

- Peeled seakale stem, very thinly sliced
- Peeled burdock stem, very thinly sliced
- Wild asparagus, very thinly sliced
- Peeled bristly ox-tongue, very thinly sliced
- Reedmace hearts, very thinly sliced

And...

- 2 medium grated carrots
- 1 medium grated onion
- 1 tbsp wholegrain mustard
- 3 tbsp mayonnaise
- Juice of 1 lemon
- Salt and pepper to taste



METHOD

Mix all ingredients together in a bowl. Simple! (N.B. If you don't want the burdock to go brown, dip it immediately in water to which

you have added vinegar or lemon juice after first peeling, and again after cutting it into thin strips before mixing it with other ingredients.)

Asparagus for free

Wild asparagus, which looks just like the stuff you buy and, fortunately, grows in abundance near me, is a delight to harvest yourself but can be quite hard to spot amongst the long wild grasses in its favoured coastal habitat. Indeed, the search really needs to begin in July, when the mature plants with red and green berries are easy to spot, revealing a suitable location to return to the following spring.

If you are unable to find any, make use, instead, of what has rather disparagingly been referred to as poor man's asparagus: hop tops. You need to pick quite a lot to make a substantial portion, but they can be found growing in profusion in the hedgerows and at woodland edges. A simple classic seasonal wild food dish is a St George's mushroom and hop top omelette!

