



# 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](http://www.wildmanwildfood.com)

# Fruitful hedges

'Let's all eat cake', suggests foraging expert Fergus Drennan.

Summer is but a distant memory and the long winter lies ahead. Yes, it's October, that time for cosy fires and comfort food again!

Still, with autumn only just beginning, let's not run with complete headlong abandon to eat the sweetest of delicious cakes just yet. By way of a few warm, sweet and moist wild fruit upside down cakes we're get to that pudding heaven soon enough. To begin, whilst stretching the definition of 'cake' to include various types of pancake, let's start with some savoury semblance of good healthy wild food.



Bullace plums – most years aren't as good as this year..



## Dock, Alexanders, nettle and hogweed savoury pancakes with wild mushrooms

### Makes about 10

60g (2½ oz) each of young Alexanders leaf and stem, tender nettle tops, young dock leaves and common hogweed young leaf and stem or whatever you can find – watercress, fat hen, sow thistle, ground elder, chickweed and countless other plants can be used

Half a day-old loaf of brown or white bread  
500ml (18floz) full-fat milk  
1 peeled and quartered onion  
4 cloves – put one into each onion quarter  
2 large eggs, separated  
2 fresh bay leaves  
1 tsp white peppercorns

2 tsp salt  
30g (1oz) butter  
1 tbsp double cream  
Mixed wild mushrooms  
A little olive oil and butter for frying  
Salt and pepper



Dock pancake with mixed wild mushrooms.

### METHOD

In different pans or the same one but with the different plants well separated, steam the Alexanders, nettles and hogweed for five minutes. Put the dock leaves in boiling water for 30 seconds and strain. Liquidize each of the greens separately – without additional water if possible – and put into individual bowls.

Break the loaf up into small pieces and blitz in a food processor for a minute. Pour the milk into a saucepan. Add the clove-studded onion quarters, bay

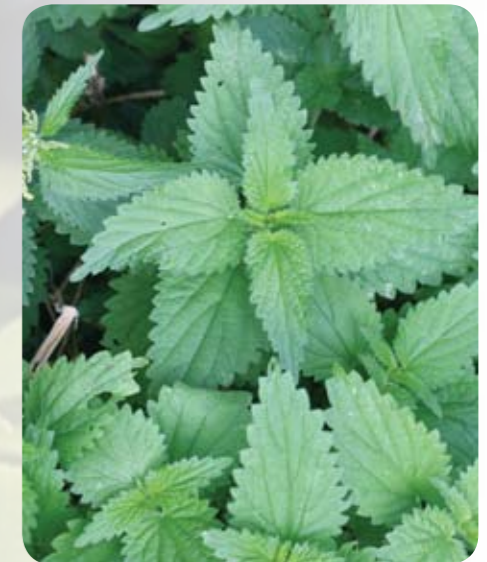
leaves, peppercorns and salt. Bring almost to boiling point and remove from heat. Leave to infuse for half an hour. Next, remove the onions, peppercorns, cloves and bay leaves. Add the bread to the saucepan and cook for about 15 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Remove from heat and add the cream, butter and beaten egg yolks. Divide the mixture between the bowls of liquidised plants and mix well. Whisk the egg white till it peaks and, again, dividing between the bowls carefully fold in.

Place a spoon full of the mixture into buttered ramekins to an inch deep. Bake in a hot oven for 15 minutes whilst shallow frying the wild mushrooms. I used horse mushrooms, field blewits and fairy ring mushroom – whatever happened to be around. Pile the mushrooms on top and serve. This makes a tasty starter course. Each pancake can be served with some blanched stems – dock pancakes with blanched Alexanders tossed in butter with lemon, salt and pepper.



Broad-leaved Dock, *Rumex obtusifolius*. Use the new growth that sometimes continues into the winter.



Stinging nettles. Autumn often produces new growth but not beyond the first frosts.

## Bullace plum, rose hip and wild apple upside down cakes

### Now for the sweet stuff!

Rose hips are a-plenty, the usually sharp bullace plums will be mellowed by now and there are still plenty of windfall apples as well as some still on the tree. Let's use them all.

The following quantities for the sponge mixture will fill an 8-inch cake tin. Used this way you could make one large version of either the rose hip, apple, or bullace plum cakes. Here, though, I'll be dividing the mixture to make the three different cakes. These cakes are all adaptations of my childhood favourite: that delicious classic the pineapple upside down cake. Pineapple upside down cake makes gluttonous use of golden syrup. Our adaptation replaces that with our chosen fruit syrup which needs to be made first. You only need about 150ml (1/4 pt) of each syrup for the cake recipe but it's easier to make a larger batch – then you also get to keep some!



Rose hip upside down cake.

Before making the syrups set aside one apple and a handful of both rose hips and bullace plums, which will be used to cover the base of each cake tin. Also, keep back 3tbsp of each fruit juice BEFORE you add the sugar.

### Rose hip syrup

**Makes 2lt (3 1/2 pt)**  
2.25kg (5lb) rosehips (only takes an hour to pick, from a good spot)  
4.5lt (8pt) water or sweet wild apple juice – or enough liquid to just cover the hips in the pan  
350g (12oz) sugar, or none if using apple juice

#### METHOD

Gather the hips without the stalk and remove the beard (dried, shrivelled flower head) as you pick. Rinse in clean water. Place hips in a large pan and add enough water/juice to just cover. Bring to the boil and simmer for 15 minutes, whilst thoroughly crushing the hips with a potato masher. Tip the whole lot into a large sieve supported over a suitably-sized clean bowl/plastic container. Initially allow the juice to run through then help push as much pulp through as possible by squidding it down with a wooden spoon/outside of a large mug or bowl.

Place the seedy mass left in the sieve into the original pan, cover with water, bring to the boil, stir it around then remove from the heat. Take the first extraction and pour half of it into a clean pillowcase that you have opened out in a large bowl. Twist round and then squeeze to force out as much juice as possible. Discard semi-dry contents of pillow case then repeat process with the second half. Next, tip in half the pulpy/seedy infusion that's in the pan into the pillowcase and extract as before; repeat with the final half. Place both extractions into a clean pan and simmer down, removing scum every now and then, until you are left with two litres (3 1/2 pt) of rich syrup.

### Apple syrup

20-30 sharp-tasting medium-sized wild apples or enough to give 1 litre (1 3/4 pt) juice. If you only have sweet apples, add the juice of a lemon or a tsp citric acid  
115g (4oz) sugar

#### METHOD

Quarter and machine juice the apples. If you don't have a juicer, peel, chop and boil to a pulp in a small amount of water before passing through muslin or a pillow case. Boil to reduce to a third of the original volume or until you have a thick syrup, and stir in the sugar to dissolve. Boil for a further two minutes. (Don't forget about it while you are on the phone, filling the house full of smoke as it burns – I did this not once, but twice while making. I wanted to cry!)

### Bullace plum syrup

2kg (4 1/2 lb) bullace plums  
500g (1lb 2oz) sugar

#### METHOD

Mash the plums in a pan to release some of the juice and then bring to a simmer for 15 minutes. Once cool enough to handle, tip into a clean pillow case and squeeze out the juice. Return the juice to the pan, add the sugar and boil to reduce the volume by half.

### For the sponges

4-6 tbsp of each syrup  
Fruit of each variety to loosely cover the cake tin base  
3 tbsp soft brown sugar  
225g (8oz) butter or margarine  
225g (8oz) caster sugar  
225g (8oz) self-raising flour  
4 medium eggs  
3 tbsp selected fruit juice (taken before the addition of sugar)

#### METHOD

Cream together the butter and sugar until light and creamy. Gradually add the beaten eggs and flour. Mix together.

Divide between three bowls stirring in a tablespoonful of unsweetened rose hip extract, bullace plum juice and apple juice respectively. Take three very small flat-sided cake tins, or three 2pt pudding basins, and grease them.

For the rose hip syrup bowl pour in 4-6 tbsp of rose hip syrup, sprinkle over halved and washed out (to remove seeds and hairs) firm hips, after boiling in light sugar syrup for a few minutes.

For the bowl with the bullace syrup, add stoned bullaces and apple chunks and syrup for the last bowl. Spoon over the relevant sponge mixtures and bake at 180°C (350F, gas 4) for about an hour. Turn out and serve hot or warm with custard.

Stag's Horn Sumac, *Rhus typhina*, is a widely-planted garden shrub naturalised in some places. Berry extracts can be used for tea, lemonade, lemon juice substitute, jellies and wine making. At this time of the year the leaves will be turning from green to yellow through to vivid orange and red before falling to leave wine-red upwards pointing cones of small hairy berries. These berry clusters, once ripe and fully formed in mid-late August remain in place and can be collected right through the winter. For a pinkish lemon juice substitute mash the berries in cold water, strain and add more berries, repeating until the desired acidity is achieved. That's its summer use. For the colder weather though, I like to make this tea.

#### Serves 1

1 large berry cluster  
300ml (1/2 pt) spring water  
1-3 dessertspoons sugar

#### METHOD

Remove the berries from the woody stems, place in a pan and pour on freshly-boiled water. Squash with a potato masher for 1 minute (if the berries are collected Aug-Oct) or only 10 seconds if collected from November-June (to prevent it becoming too tannic). Strain, sweeten and reheat.



Stag's horn sumac tea.



November fungi – mostly Field Blewits found in short grass.



Fairy Ring Mushroom (*Marasmius oreades*).



Rose hips.