by Fergus Drennan,

Professional Forager

pring, then, and, in particular, the months of April and May, presents a unique opportunity to make use of a vast array of differently flavoured and textured plant stems. At other times these stems would be totally absent, too tough, too thin, too pithy or simply dried out. Learning to identify meristems is part of the ongoing process of building up a more thorough and complete picture of the plants in your wild food repertoire, and learning to recognise their individually unique variation in form throughout their life cycle. It also greatly expands your wild food repertoire if, for instance, you apply the principles of meristem identification to wild foods from which you have frequently eaten the leaves at later stages of growth. To give an example, I've been eating dock and bristly ox-tongue leaves for years, and it was a delightful revelation a few years back to discover that the young succulent stems of both plants were, in fact, perhaps the most delicious edible parts of all. However, apply this principle with caution. To give an extreme example, you may have safely eaten small quantities of the soft fruit (excluding seeds) of the yew tree. That does not mean it's safe to try new yew shoots. That could have deadly consequences. So let's follow Sam once more with his sevenstep guide to identifying meristems and learning the difference, as he puts it, between ingesting roughage and eating food!

1) They bend, break, or snap more easily than mature stems.

- 2) They may droop or bend over at the top, due to lack of cellulose.
- 3) The leaves they bear are not fully formed.
- 4) They are thicker in proportion to their length.
- 5) They come to an abrupt end.
- 6) They may be lighter or different in colour than mature stems.
- 7) Features such as hairs, ridges, thorns, or roots may be absent or not fully developed. *
- * From Nature's Garden: A guide to Identifying, Harvesting, and Preparing Edible Wild Plants by Samual Thayer. Forager's Harvest 2010. The book covers 42 plants found in the US, but over half can be found in the UK

The list** opposite includes the ones I commonly use, representing plants which, for the most part, are themselves fairly common. Some are simply stems rather than meristems, eg, dandelion. Although I've indicated that some do not need peeling, in many instances this only applies when the stems are 2-3 inches long. The flavours range

> from mild (members of the daisy family) and strong and distinct (most members of the carrot family), to eyewateringly pungent (a few members of the cabbage family). Any part of the dittander plant - root, stem, leaf or flower, for instance 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 or pickled. Some of the more substantial stems are suitable for cooking, unpeeled, in a pit oven or on hot embers. Alexanders, burdock, sea kale and reedmace are particularly well suited for

such treatment.

- 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.
- Bristly Ox-tongue (Picris echioides) Daisy/Asteraceae family: Mild, refreshing, solid and crunchy texture. Needs peeling.
- Smooth Sow Thistle (Sonchus oleraceus) Daisy/Asteraceae family: Hollow, slightly bitter. Soak before use. No need to peel.
- Dandelion (Taraxacum spp) Daisy/Asteraceae family: Thin, hollow, slightly bitter. Chop, and add to salads. No need to peel
- Alexanders (Smyrnium olusatrum) Carrot/Apiaceae family: Fullflavoured, solid when young; then hollow. Needs peeling.
- Wild Angelica (Angelica sylvestris) Carrot/Apiaceae family: Distinct flavour. Peel; cook.
- Wild Carrot (Daucas carrota) Carrot/Apiaceae family: Succulent and refreshing carroty flavour. Peel.
- 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.
- Dittander (Lepidium latifolium) Cabbage/Cruciferae family: Solid, hot mustard flavour. No need to peel.
- Sea Kale (Crambe maritima) Cabbage/Cruciferae family: Firm, solid; cabbage flavour. .Only peel after flowers begin opening.
- Garlic Mustard (Alliaria petiolata) Cabbage/Cruciferae family: Solid, mild garlic, mustard, cheese flavour. No need to peel.
- 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
- Wild Asparagus (Asparagus officinalis) Lily/Liliaceae family: Asparagus flavour, of course. Solid. No need to peel.
- Reedmace (Typha latifolia and T.angustifolia) 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" of shoot top. No need to peel. Cook.
- Staghorn sumac (Rhus typhina). Cashew/Anacardiaceae family. New shoots and young branches. Peeling essential.
- * Consult a good wild flower guide for precise habitat info. and identification. Alternatively, my old business partner Miles Irving's excellent The Forager Handbook has a wealth of such edibility info (but is not a wild food id guide)..



The art of picking Vegetables at the best stage of growth is the art of recognizing meristems. In my experience, this claim by US-based forager, Samuel Thayer, in his excellent new book Nature's Garden, is certainly true. The edible parts of plants fall into three general categories that give food for thought at different times of the year: Winter; storage organs (tubers and roots), summer; reproductive parts (flowers, fruits and seeds) and, of course, spring, a time of rapid new growth and, hence, new stem shoots or



harvesting. Much bigger and it will be



Reedmace Shoots

Reedmace before and after peeling away outer leaves. Plant on far left showing connected rhizome; on far right, the edible core. Note this can be distingusised from toxic yellow flag by the roundish stems. Yellow flag is more flattened and elliptical.

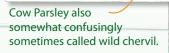
When harvesting the stems of these plants, it is more important than usual to gather only a small percentage of the plants in a particular area, the reason being that taking the central flowering stem means that, for most of these plants, there will be no possibility of flowering and, hence, producing 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 2 weeks. Also remember that the young leaves or unopened flower buds or clusters of half of these plants are good to eat so don't throw them away.

One plant that puts out a main flower stem and several smaller ones is Cow parsley. This, together with wild carrot, wild angelica and alexanders are plants you must confidently be able to distinguish from toxic lookalikes in the same family, notably hemlock (Conium maculatum), fools parsley (Aethusa cynapium), rough chervil (Chaerophyllum temulum) - all superficially like cow parsley - and hemlock water-dropwort (Oenanthe crocata) - superficially like both Alexanders and angelica. On one occasion I saw all these plants growing within 50 metres of each other. Note also that skin contact with sap and/or leaves is known to cause contact dermatitis in some people when handling wild angelica and wild carrot. Nevertheless, don't be fearful but do be careful out there!

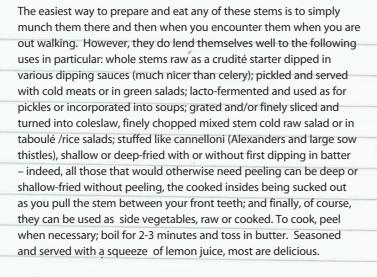
wild carrot in situ. Note the distinctively shaped old seed head placed in the picture - like a hand with partially turned in fingers. Often found near the coast but also dry grassy areas and wasteground in land. Preferes full sun







hemlock water-dropwort. Usually growing by or near fresh water. This plant near obvious water source



Right now I'm particularly busy collecting Japanese Knotweed. This is an invasive plant, so collect to your heart's content. Of course, it must be borne in mind that it is illegal to cause the spread of this plant, so any parts not being used for food must be rendered non-viable by burning, desiccating, boiling etc. In addition, permission to gather and/or certain knowledge that contractors have not been in to inject the roots or spray the plant with weed killer must be sought before harvesting.

The most succulent and substantial stems are those at what I call the alien asparagus stage, between 2 and 10 inches in length. If longer,

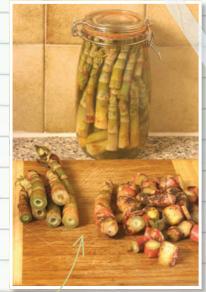
grasp the whole top part and give a fast twist of the wrist. Like asparagus, it will snap with a pop to leave you with just the tender part that doesn't need peeling. This can be cooked as a side vegetable and goes especially well with duck and pork or can be used just like rhubarb - it tastes very similar. That sharp flavour results from the high oxalic acid content, so do not consume large amounts if you have a known sensitivity to rhubarb or suffer from gout or kidney stones. If you wish to be really clever, you can soak the young shoots in sweetened and flavoured high alcohol spirits for a week and then dip and set in melted chocolate or, indeed, set in boiled sugar on a stick in the manner of toffee



list, Japanese knotweed (closely followed by Alexanders) is the most versatile from a culinary and bushcraft perspective. (The peeled stems of 6-foot plants make great cordage and I even caught a pike

prior to freezing and dipping in melted chocolate. Note, when collected young stems like those shown, the whole stem often pulls away. Cut these from the base until hollow centre is revealed or all bitter tasting yellow bottom part is removed. If storing in alcohol for more than 10 days, transfer to fresh sweetened spirit to prevent any

once, using an old stem as a fishing rod.) But, if I had to choose a favourite it would be lesser burdock. (I've not tried greater burdock as it's not so common locally.) The solid stem is just superb, raw or cooked, and is one of those foods that, after eating, make you feel really well nourished.



Japanese knotweed stems soaking in alcohol

does not affect the flavour. Tender stems range from 6-24 inches in length. If it bends and feels flexible the core will make good eating. Peeled Burdock Stem

St Georges Mushroom

Omelette

Burdock stem peeled and unpeeled. The peeled stem rapidly discolours brown but this

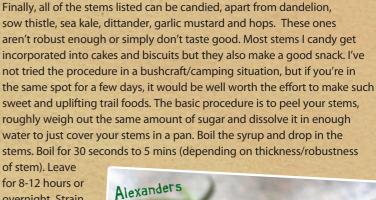


Wild asparagus, which looks just like the stuff you buy and, fortunately, grows in abundance near me, is a delight to harvest yourself but can be quite hard to spot amongst the long wild grasses in its favoured coastal habitat. Indeed, the search really needs to begin in July when the mature plants with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

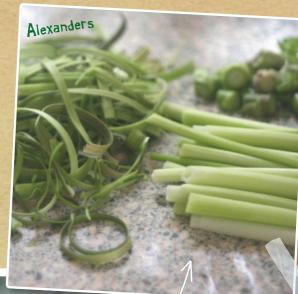
referred to as poor man's asparagus - hop tops. You need to pick quite a lot to make a substantial portion. Nevertheless, they can be found growing in profusion in the hedgerows and at woodland edges. A simple classic seasonal wild food dish has to be a St George's Mushroom and Hop Top Omelette!

Other great things to try: Alexander 'Cannelloni' Blue Cheese and St George's Mushroom Bake: 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 thistles stems can be soaked in lemon water overnight and then stuffed with sushi rice, mixed with dulse seaweed and served cold with a suitable dipping sauce. Dittander, garlic mustard, Lady's Smock and sweetcorn fritters: Chop the stems; mix with egg, flour and seasoning. Spoon out into a frying pan and shallow-fry on both sides until just browning.



for 8-12 hours or overnight. Strain off syrup and boil to reduce by a third. Submerge stems in syrup and again leave for 8-12 hours repeating this whole process four times in total. Finish by drying stems in the sun.



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peeled Alexander stems, stem pee remnants and cut out stem nodes. The stems are a joy to peel using a knife. If any visible fibres remain use a knife to pull them away. If they break they're tender enough to leave.

Wild Asparagus

Wild asparagus (July). The search for tender spring asparagus shoots in May, unless you know precisely when to look, must begin in July or August of the previous year. Then the mature plants can easily be spotted amongst the often knee-high grasses of its favoured coastal habitat.

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