

# WILD LITERATURE

## A Review of Wild Food Related Books

by  
*Fergus Drennan,*  
Professional Forager



My shelves heave under the collective weight of over 100 wild food related books. By this I mean, not only general wild food books, but also ID guides and cook books for the 4 main wild food groups: Land Plants, Fungi, Seaweeds, and The Animal Kingdom. Therefore, I've divided these titles into 4 categories: Wild Food (General) and Plant ID guides; Fungi (General) and fungi ID guides; Seaweeds (General) and seaweed ID guides, and Cook Books. Sadly, to avoid a completely superficial treatment, there is only sufficient space here to do the first category any justice; the others must await future articles. Also, I've limited myself to English language books covering, for the most part, the UK flora.

Reviewing such a vast literature is, then, challenging, indeed. The particular requirements and interests of any would-be purchaser of these titles is likely to be as varied and large in number as the books themselves. The simple fact is that there is no Holy Grail of a book, a single in-depth wild food guide covering all these food groups, to include their identification, processing and cooking, that is small and lightweight enough to fit perfectly in a back pocket or rucksack. Then again, you might want a huge weighty encyclopaedic tome to engross yourself in while sitting by the fire after spending hours outside on a chill-to-the-bone January forage.

It should go without saying that I would recommend all the books reviewed here, as the limitations of any particular title is more than made up for by the strengths of others and vice versa. Note: throughout and for ease of description, when I refer to 'plants' this excludes seaweeds as some are in the plant kingdom while others are not. The price guide refers to the cheapest new book price I could find on line (Nov 2010). Many can be picked up much cheaper secondhand, of course. No doubt readers may have other titles they rate highly. It would be good to hear your suggestions.

### Wild Food (General) and Plant ID guides

**Wild Food by Roger Phillips:** Macmillan (1983). Weight (wt) 620g. A4x1cm with colour photos. £9.51. 159 pages, covering 117 plants, 48 fungi and 6 seaweeds. Spring to late autumn seasonal arrangement. Poisonous species not covered. Detailed recipes throughout.

Despite its limitation in scope, compared to some other titles, after over 25 years this is still my favourite wild food book. It includes the more common and, hence, easily found wild foods and strikes a good balance between info on folklore, historical usage, descriptive detail and recipe content. The plant photos are good, not excellent, but the atmospheric food shots are of inspired excellence. If I had a partner who wasn't as keen on foraging as I am, I'd get him/her this book as a gift to fire up his/her enthusiasm.

The general arrangement could be just a tad more systematic for ease of use, but if you like the book, anyway, the current arrangement will just add to the charm. Incidentally, there is another American edition ISBN 0-316-70611-6. Half the content is the same as the UK edition and half features US plants. This is where I first learnt about the edibility of Yucca flowers, Staghorn sumac berries, and Chonggak or Green Sponge Fingers – the seaweed Codium fragile for which, respectively, there are the



following recipes: Sumac lemonade, Yucca flower Hash, Yucca and apple dressing, Chonggak tea, and salad. These plants can all be found in the UK – a few now naturalised. Many other American plants mentioned will be of great interest to those keen on forest gardening.

**Food For Free by Richard Mabey:** Collins (Colour photographic edition 2001 £24.49 192 pages; wt 607g; 24x19x1.2cm) and Collins Gem edition; 239 pages [wt 110g; 12x8x1.5cm] £2.50; and others. Covers 107 plants, 50 fungi and 10 seaweeds. Spring to

winter seasonal arrangement. A very limited number of poisonous species (fungi) covered. Detailed recipes throughout.

A hard book to review, given the number of editions that vary considerably in quality. This is very much like the Roger Phillips book – good, but not as good as the former, mainly for aesthetic reasons,

although the systematic arrangement of individual entries is better. Still, a good read. The photographic edition looks nicer but the photos are merely average with some very good and the occasional useless one (from an ID perspective). The other editions use either line drawings or colour illustrations, none of which are very good, unfortunately. The handy pocket guide really does fit easily into a pocket, so is definitely worth having, especially if camping or trekking; having said that, although often described as the forager's bible, it is far from it. On several courses I've run, people have brought this along, with a view to ticking off our finds. On such occasions, 'but it's not mentioned here', becomes a repeated refrain...

**Food from the Wild by Ian Burrows (2005);** New Holland Publishers. Wt 616g (hardback); 25x18x1.8 cm. £9.74. 144 pages, covering 135 plants, 102 fungi and 10 seaweeds. Colour illustrations. Arranged: fruits,

nuts and seeds, flowers, greens and vegetables, herbs, roots, seaweeds and fungi. Recipes throughout. Some poisonous species mentioned.



With its pretty yet average to merely quite good (botanically speaking) illustrations, I expected not to like this book. In fact, its systematic and tidy arrangement is very appealing: Dimensions, Occurrence, Habitat and Distribution, Size and Description, Harvesting and Use. The fungi section in particular covers a really good range of species rarely mentioned in other guides, such as the tasty Lentinellus cochleatus (Aniseed Cockleshell/Cockle-shell Lentinus) and Clavulina rugosa (Wrinkled Club/Wrinkled Coral Fungus). Although, as for all these books, an accompanying and better ID guide would be needed, at least, here Ian mentions species that could be confused with those illustrated (fungi section only). Tips for harvesting and use, brief but very useful.

**Wild Food For Free by Jonathan Hilton (2007);** Octopus Publishing. Wt 563g; 18.5x20x1.7cm. £9.29. 256 pages covering 67 plants, 12 fungi and 2

seaweeds. Colour photographs. Arranged into 8 different habitats with a separate detailed recipe chapter at the back. Few poisonous species mentioned.

Well laid out with 2 pages for each entry and with entries systematically arranged as follows: What is it? What to look for; Can be mistaken for; Where to look; When to look for it; What does it taste like? How is it used? Try it in (recipe page number), and Caution; one would expect this book to be better than it actually is. It doesn't come across as a book written by a forager. In spite of the often useful information in the forager's check list for each entry, some of the more important information I'd expect to see on such a list is not provided. The seasonal availability calendars on each page are not very accurate. Why two pages are dedicated to olives is a mystery but one not as deep as the identity of the 2 photos masquerading as mugwort under that entry; they clearly are not. The recipes look OK but I've not tried any of them.

**The Forager Handbook by Miles Irving (2009);** Ebury Press. Wt 1kg 250g (hardback). 19x25x3.3cm. £16-61. 408 pages, covering 380 plants (294 in detail), 0 fungi and 16 seaweeds. Black and white ID photos. Arranged botanically according to plant genera. Recipe hints and outlines throughout for all plants, with a few in more detail. 13 poisonous plants covered; others mentioned.

If I were absolutely pushed to give one of the books reviewed here the accolade of Foraging Bible, it would be this one, in spite of the devilish inadequacy (but not inaccuracy) of the black and white photographic illustrations. The substantial and informative introductory sections (39 pages) provide a wealth of useful information clearly gleaned from experience. The systematic botanical arrangement is well thought out with good overviews to introduce the larger plant families; this also makes it very easy





to use, as I do, with my favourite plant ID guide (The Wild Flower Key) which is similarly organised. Of particular note here is the inclusion of the grass family found in few other guides. Entries are arranged as follows: Distribution, Habitat, Description, Similar species, Notes, Uses/Recipes, Benefits and, where applicable, Hazards. Given the large number of plants covered, one might expect the information here to be brief. On the contrary, although not much folklore or historical information is given, what is provided is both practical and useful, focussing heavily on contemporary usage. Detailed recipes or recipe outlines are provided by top chefs, such as, Mark Hix and René Redzepi. Nevertheless, occasionally a recipe that appears to give detailed info isn't quite satisfactory, an example being the Korean recipe for boiled bracken fronds: "The young shoots are collected when about 25cm tall, then boiled for about 2 hours, and left in the sun to dry....They are boiled again before use." In fact, young shoots should not be cut from the base but snapped as low to the base as possible (like asparagus) to get the tender portion. The final boiling prior to consumption needs to be 1 hr without pre-soaking, 5 minutes if pre-soaked overnight. Apart from such occasional detail-lacking oversights this is a great guide and reference book. With additional photos and a Kindle format it would be excellent.

### The Forager's Harvest by Samuel Thayer (2006);

Forager's Harvest. Wt 7504g; 15x23x2cm. £14.56. 360 pages, covering 28 plants (14 relevant to UK). Photographic.

Nature's Garden by Samuel Thayer (2010 ; ) Forager's Harvest. Wt 968g; 15x23x2.5cm. £14.56. 512 pages, covering 42 plants (25 relevant to the UK). Photographic.



These 2 books and the one below represent a different approach to those so far reviewed, in that **they focus on a much smaller selection of plants but in great detail. It is an approach which succeeds very well, so well,**



**in fact, that despite these being written by an American for an American audience, the detail provided for the plants found in the UK is well worth seeking out:** Reed mace, Marsh Marigold and Sumac being good examples from the first book, Black Nightshade, Dock and Acorns being good examples from the second. The attention to detail is especially valuable as it pertains to each entry's Harvest and Preparation section. Sam is clearly passionate and exceedingly knowledgeable about wild food and communicates that wealth of knowledge in a clear and systematic manner. Distinguished ethnobotanist, Nancy Turner, describes The forager's Harvest as, "a 'must' for novice harvesters and experienced foragers alike", and Nature's Garden as, "a book that will grab you and hold you fascinated and amazed to the very last page...a rich compendium of dedicated research and first-hand experience....my number one choice of edible wild plant books". With this assessment I would concur wholeheartedly, if they had been written by a Brit for a British audience. As they stand, I would only recommend them to those with an already established passion for and experience of foraging.

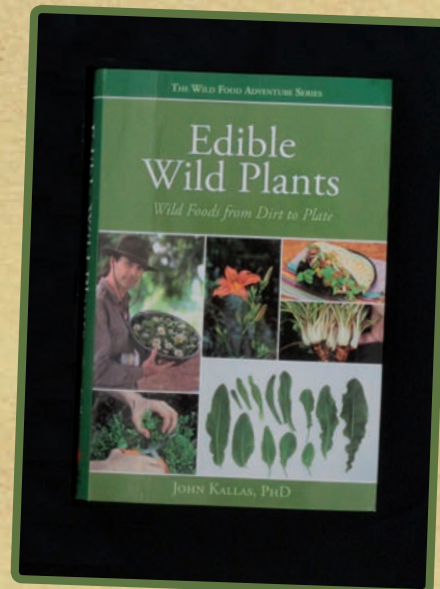
### Edible Wild Plants - Wild Foods From Dirt to Plate John Kallas (2010);

Gibbs Smith. Wt 973g; 16x23.5x2.4cm; £10.18. 416 pages, covering 14 plants (13 relevant to the UK). Some poisonous look-a-likes covered. Recipes throughout.

This book's attention to detail is second to none or, at least, ties in equal place with Samuel's books, yet, although written by a US-based forager, it has the distinct advantage of being 99% relevant to the UK. Without spoiling the surprise, I can tell you that it covers Fat Hen, Chickweed, Mallow, Curly Dock, Sheep Sorrel, Wood Sorrel, Wild Turnip, Winter Cress, Garlic Mustard, Shepherd's Purse, Dandelion, Cat's Ear, Sow Thistle, and Nettlewort. He divides these into Foundation Greens, Tart Greens, Pungent Greens and Bitter Greens. **The real surprise here is the incredible depths John goes into – all clearly based on deep experience. The introductory section: Understanding Wild Foods and the concluding section: The Potential of Wild Foods all make for interesting and informative reading. My one criticism is the food photography – not very inspiring and stuck in the 1970s, but good if you love the 70s, of course. Highly recommended to new and experienced foragers alike.** Another book by an American that is well worth getting is The Neighborhood Forager by Robert Henderson.

### Hedgerow by John Wright (2010);

Bloomsbury. Wt 490g; A5x2.4cm; £8.87; 257 pages; covering 56 edible plants and 12 poisonous ones. Photographic. Recipe section at the end.



Edible Seashore by John Wright (2010); Bloomsbury; Wt 464g; A5x2.2cm; £8.75. 240 pages, covering 14 edible plants, 2 poisonous plants, 11 seaweeds, 1 mushroom, 18 molluscs and crustaceans. Photographic. Recipe section at the end.

**I simply love these books. It is a rare treat indeed to find a foraging guide so well organised and sensible and yet written with such wit and humour.** These books are the middle-way

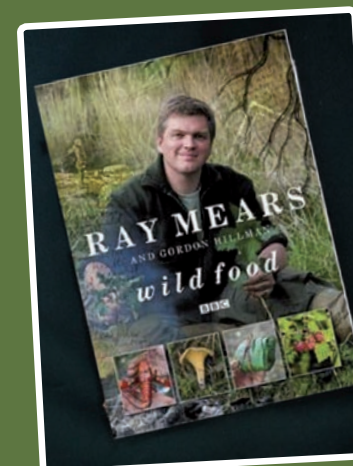


compromise between those titles covering a large number of entries and those focussing in great detail on a smaller number. It's a compromise that works exceedingly well – even down to the handy rucksackable size of the books. Both books contain a very good introductory section to include important information about conservation and the law. Each entry has a boxed header with Description, Habitat, Distribution, Season and, where applicable, Landing Restrictions and Conservation Status, followed by a page of information, including harvesting techniques, personal anecdotes and edible usage. The photography throughout is very good, although, as always, additional ID guides would be useful. The substantial and detailed recipe sections, with photos, are no mere afterthought, but are well worked and easily achievable without being in anyway dull, really delicious in many instances. In short, these are superb books for beginners, yet also of value to any wild food enthusiast.

### Wild Food by Ray Mears and Gordon Hillman (2007);

Hodder and Stoughton. Wt1kg 175g (hardback); 19.5x25.2x3.1cm; £13.50 (paperback £8.89). 352 pages,

covering 180 plants, 6 fungi, a few crustaceans. Arranged by plant family. Photos throughout.



That this book was published to accompany the Wild Food TV series is far too obvious in the sense that it has been rushed out with too many basic typing errors. That irritation aside, the book seeks to understand how and what our ancient ancestors would have regularly utilised as food here in the British

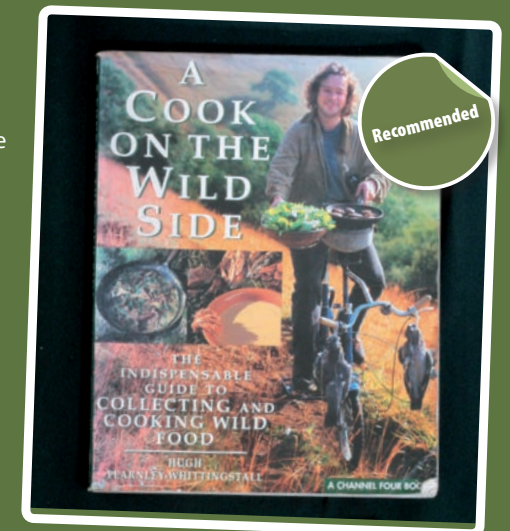
Isles – no contemporary gourmet recipes here, quite rightly; for seaweeds, though, the result is extremely disappointing – one paragraph. True, there isn't much historical evidence to build on here, but it does exist. That aside, and bearing in mind that this is not a botanical guide, the plant section is good in descriptive detail of where to find and how to prepare/process individual plants. Nevertheless, as with all these books, although the photographs are good, a decent ID guide would be needed in conjunction with it.

The greatest appeal for me lies in the descriptions and photographs of primitive processing techniques – a bit more would have gone down well. Given that sustaining starchy foods would have been highly valued in ancient times, the book does a great job of exploring that dimension. All in all, essential reading for any keen foragers but not for those without culinary skill, preferring detailed recipes for the contemporary kitchen.

### A Cook on the Wild Side by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall (1997);

Boxtree; Wt 604g; 18.8x24x1.3cm; £12.99 (used). 188 pages; covering 50 plants, 13 fungi, 3 seaweeds, 21 fish and seafood (some freshwater) and some game. Photos and recipes throughout.

Written before the dawn of the River Cottage era, this still remains a good overall introduction to British wild and foraged foods. The ID photos are dire but the recipes, layout and style all make this an enjoyable book and one I would definitely recommend.



**Given that I've just reviewed all these books, it may come as a surprise to hear that I very rarely use any of them. Once you've acquired a certain proficiency in identification and familiarity with the more common wild foods, as well as some skill in the kitchen, it becomes more useful, in my opinion, to expand wild food knowledge, primarily by use of ID guides and internet-based research. To this end, the resources I use most frequently are: New Flora of the British Isles, 3rd ed, by Clive Stace, The Wild Flower Key by Francis Rose and Clare O'Reilly, and The Vegetative Key to the British Flora by John Pollard and Eric Clement. To a lesser extent, I use Collins Complete British Wild Flowers, Cassels Wild Flowers and Wild Flowers of Britain by Roger Phillips. Not containing information on edibility, they are, nonetheless, wonderful when used in conjunction with such internet-based resources as the superb Plants for a Future website and plant database:**

[www.pfaf.org](http://www.pfaf.org)