



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

Pick of the pickles!

Desperately disappointed by the offerings of Britain's retailers, **Fergus Drennan** decided to put the flavour back into the truly-traditional, home-made pickle.



Clockwise from top: Jelly Ear fungus, Dandelion buds, Burdock root, Chanterelles, Fennel and Reedmace hearts, Dittander stems.

Pickling is easy, pickles are delicious, pickling allows for an almost infinite variety of wild plant flavours, textures and colours to be preserved and used to liven-up all sorts of dishes throughout the year. Indeed, they can even be enjoyed by being just eaten straight from the jar.

Five years ago I would have considered all these statements as simply wrong or muddle-headed. I hated pickles! Of course, it's a question of personal taste, but up to that point, on the rare occasion I had tried pickles, either purchased or home-made, I had found them

all to be harshly acidic, monotonously similar and just plain disappointing. In short, they got me in a pickle! So how was I converted to the simple joy of pickling? One answer is, quite simply, sugar. The right balance of sugar to acid transforms home-made pickles from abhorrent to ambrosial. Of equal importance is the satisfaction to be gained from the act of foraging itself, as well as the creative challenge of coming up with new and successful pickling recipes.

Divided according to plant part, here are just some of my favourite pickles that can be made in June, a few of which I've selected to demonstrate their method of pickling:

Mushrooms

Jelly Ear (*Auricularia auricula-judae*), Chanterelles (*Cantharellus cibarius*)

Roots

Burdock (*Arctium minus/A.lappa*), Common Thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*), Alexanders (*Smyrnium olusatrum*)

Central flower stems

Dock (*Rumex obtusifolius*, *R. sanguineus*, *R. crispus*, *R. hydrolapathum*), Charlock (*Sinapis alba*), Burdock (*Arctium minus/A.lappa*), Reedmace (*Typha latifolia*, *T. Angustifolia*), Dittander (*Lepidium latifolium* – early season), Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), Japanese Knotweed (*Polygonum japonicum* –April/May)

Flower buds

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), Goat's Beard (*Tragopogon pratensis*), Sea Aster (*Aster tripolium*)

Leaves

Sea Purslane (*Halimione portulacoides*), Annual Seablite (*Suaeda maritima*), Rock Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*), Marsh Samphire (*Salicornia perennis*)

Fruits/seeds

Ash keys (*Fraxinus excelsior*), immature Honesty seed pods (*Lunaria annua*).

The two basic rules for successful pickling are that all equipment should be as clean as possible – jars and lids sterilised, and the ingredients should be fresh, clean and in immaculate condition. Failing this, to a certain extent, great pickles can still be made, they just won't keep so well. As for vinegar and spices, as long as the vinegar is of at least 5 % acid, just experiment. For simplicity though, in all of the recipes below, I have used Sarson's distilled and spiced pickling vinegar as well as Veggie Perrin's dried pickling spices (a mixture of mustard seed, coriander seed, chillies, peppercorns, ginger, cloves and allspice). The latter isn't strictly necessary when using ready-spiced vinegar. Nevertheless, I prefer the extra flavour and, besides, I like to see them floating about in the jar.



Young burdock plants.

Burdock root pickle

Dig the roots of young plants in which the central flowering stem has not developed, scrub clean, remove small roots from the central tap root (larger ones can also be pickled), scrape/peel and cut into small matchstick-sized batons, then place in a bowl of medium brine solution for 10 minutes. In the meantime place the pickle jar and lid in a pan of cold water so that everything is completely submerged. Bring to the boil and boil for five minutes. In another pan pour in a jar's worth of pickling vinegar, a teaspoon of pickling spice and two dessert spoons of sugar (the quantities I use for a 300ml (11 fl oz) jar). Bring to the boil and boil for a minute or two.

Next, remove the burdock pieces from brine, place in a saucepan and pour on boiling water to just cover. Boil for about two minutes. Remove the hot jar from the water with a pair of tongs or similar, strain off the water from the roots and loosely pack them into the jar. Pour on the hot pickling vinegar right to the very top of the jar. Holding the jar with a cloth, screw the lid on firmly but loosely. Gently tap the bottom of the jar on the work surface several times and rotate from side to side to release any trapped air. Remove lid, top up with vinegar and screw back on tightly.



Young burdock plants showing roots - 5 minutes to dig; 45 minutes to clean and prepare!



Pre-boiling burdock roots prior to pickling.



Prepared burdock root in jar filled to the very top with boiled pickling vinegar.

Dandelion bud pickle

Collect a jar's worth of firm and tightly-closed dandelion buds. Using a sharp knife to cut them away from the plant, rather than pulling them away, will minimise the chance of them getting squashed. Wash well and remove the calyx (the small green leafy part under the bud). Loosely fill a hot sterilised jar with the buds and proceed as above.



Dandelions will establish themselves anywhere given half a chance.



Preparing dandelion buds for pickling (flowers for wine).



Ready-prepared dandelion buds.

Jelly Ear pickle

This might not sound that appetising but it's definitely one of my favourite pickles – you can always call them Cloud or Wood Ear Fungus, but 'Ear' is compulsory! The great thing about Jelly Ear fungus is that it can be collected at any time of the year. Indeed, the summer months are sometimes the best as it can be picked ready-dried from the tree (Elder and its fallen branches). If picking the fungus fresh, leave indoors on a piece of newspaper for a few days to dry out. The ones I used here were picked dry from the tree.

Firstly, pick off any bits of elder bark still adhering to the fungus, and then very quickly rinse the dried fungi in three changes of cold water (i.e. don't give it a chance to rehydrate). Cover with cider and leave to soak for 20 minutes. Remove, shake off excess cider and loosely pack into the hot and sterilized jar. Then proceed as above.



Jelly Ear.



Dried Jelly Ear.



Jelly Ear after soaking.



Jelly Ear rehydrating in cider.



Pouring vinegar on to the Jelly Ears.

Fennel stem and Reedmace heart pickle

From March until early June the outer leaves of Reedmace can be peeled away to leave an edible central core (at their best in early May). Eaten raw or cooked they can be used for salads, as a vegetable or pickled. Also from March until early June fennel is at its most tender. Use the very new growth, found by peeling back the outer stem layer or use whole tender stems – some may need peeling. Cut the fennel and Reedmace to the required size and proceed as above. Remember, when collecting any plants, seek the landowner's permission first and do not gather from polluted areas, including polluted water. There are large quantities of Reedmace growing in ditches near my local landfill site, for instance. I would never collect them there.

For more information on exactly where to find these plants please visit my website: wildmanwildfood.co.uk, consult a good plant guide such as *The Wild Flower Key* by Francis Rose and Clare O'Reilly, or visit the excellent Plants for a Future website and consult the impressive database: www.pfaf.org/database/index.php



Me amongst the reedmace in July note the size; too late for reedmace hearts)



Fennel



Fennel and reedmace stem hearts ready for pickling.

Japanese Knotweed and elderflower

To make about one pint (575ml)
 5 large fresh or dried elderflower blossom clusters
 ½ -1kg (1-2 lbs) becoming tough Japanese Knotweed stems
 1.5 pints water
 Sugar to taste (approx 100g (3½ oz))

METHOD

Remove the leaves from the knotweed, roughly chop the stalks and boil in the water for 10 minutes before firmly bashing with a potato masher. Strain the liquid through a clean cloth into a new pan, add the sugar and allow it to dissolve and then bring the pan to the boil. Turn off the heat and add the elderflowers. Leave to cool, strain through a clean cloth and chill prior to drinking. An alternative is to make or buy some elderflower cordial and dilute with knotweed extract rather than water.

Note: This is a lovely way to enjoy Japanese knotweed's rhubarb-like flavour when it is too tough to eat. However, it is illegal to cause the spread of this plant so all offcuts must be completely desiccated in the sun, burnt or boiled to render non-viable. Also when seeking permission to collect it, make sure it has not been treated with weed killer. Drink in moderation if you are sensitive to rhubarb and its high oxalic acid content. Finally – don't let all the caveats put you off!

Elderflower and Japanese Knotweed drink.

