



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

Wild winter soups

Fergus Drennan cannot wait to fill our bowls with delicious winter soup.

As a sequel to my first wild winter soups article, I shall set myself a similar challenge: to make five or six different soups that, individually, incorporate a seasonal fruit (sea buckthorn), root (burdock), leafy green (sorrel), seaweed

(laver), mushroom (field blewits) and rhizome (Reedmace).

So, again, be prepared to venture out into the cold and be rewarded with the warming and wild delights that are delicious and nutritious soups made with the pick of the season's forage: Spicy Sea Buckthorn

and Carrot Soup, Burdock and Parsnip Soup, Sorrel and Chickweed Soup, Laver Consommé, Field Blewit and Wild Garlic Soup, and Reedmace and Leek Soup. (Note: in all the recipes, the water/stock quantity is approximate – adjust according to how thick/thin you like your soups.)

Spicy sea buckthorn and carrot soup



Fergus inspecting a crop of Sea Buckthorn (not to be confused with superficially similar looking *Pyracantha* species!)



Gloves are needed for squeezing out the juice when using fresh berry clusters of sea buckthorn.

Serves 4

One of my favourite soups – first sampled at the lovely St. Anne's Well café in Great Malvern – is carrot and orange. Sea buckthorn, with its similar but unique citrus, kumquat/Cape gooseberry flavour, has four to six times the quantity of the vitamin C of oranges, so it's a similar soup – but on steroids! Sea buckthorn berries can be collected from late August until March (in some years). The thorny bush can be found growing all around the British coast on sand dunes and grassy areas. Wearing thick gloves, squeeze berry clusters on the bush to collect in a container, or cut off a berry cluster and freeze before knocking off the berries.

- 1 large chopped onion
- 900g (2lb) carrots, sliced
- 450ml (16 fl oz) fresh sea buckthorn juice
- 1 large finely-sliced garlic clove
- 600ml (2pt) vegetable stock
- 1 tsp chopped green chilli
- 3 tbsp olive oil
- 1 sprig fresh mint
- 3 sage leaves
- 1 tsp black pepper

For the garnish, per serving

- 2-3 whole berries
- 2 small mint leaves
- A swirl of cream or natural yoghurt

METHOD

Bring the stock and sea buckthorn juice to boiling point and add the carrots, onion, mint, sage and seasoning. Lower the heat and simmer for 10-15 minutes or until the vegetables are tender. Remove the mint and sage, transfer the soup to a blender and blend the soup until smooth – or leave it somewhat granular if preferred. (I do. Actually, I often liquidise half of the mixture until completely smooth, then gently liquidise the rest – then combine the two. The choice is yours! Reheat adjusting seasoning if desired, garnish and serve. I like to mix single cream and natural yoghurt together and swirl that in.

Burdock and parsnip soup

Burdock is a biennial plant – taking two years to mature, flower and seed. Usually at the end of October the leaves of the first year's growth die back. Nevertheless, in very sheltered situations they persist and, hence, can be found throughout the winter. Of course, you may be wonderfully organised, have dug them in October, and have them stored in your root cellar already – and are just waiting to be used!

- 2 parsnips, scrubbed and sliced
- 400g (14oz) burdock root, scrubbed and sliced
- 1 litre (1¾ pt) vegetable stock
- 1 litre (1¾ pt) milk
- 3 medium-sized onions, peeled and sliced
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped
- A small piece of fresh ginger, chopped
- Knob of butter
- 1-2 tbsp medium strength curry powder
- Sea salt and freshly-ground black pepper

METHOD

Place *all* the ingredients in a large pan, bring to a simmer and continue simmering for 30 minutes or until vegetable are soft, stirring every now and then to prevent sticking. Liquidise and adjust seasoning to taste.



Sorrel and chickweed soup

Common sorrel grows lush and large during the winter months – at least where I am in the south, as does chickweed – often in the same damp grassy locations: common land, field edges, and hedgerows. Do be aware, though, that due to its calcium oxalate content, sorrel soup is not recommended – especially on a regular basis, for those with gout, kidney stones or related conditions.

Serves 4

- 300g (10½ oz) common sorrel leaves
- 200g (7oz) chickweed
- 1 large finely sliced onion
- 1 large peeled and thinly sliced potato
- 15g (½ oz) butter
- 1 litre (1¾ pt) vegetable stock
- 150ml (¼ pt) milk
- Single cream
- Salt and pepper

METHOD

Melt the butter and gently shallow-fry the onion until translucent. Add in the potato and stock, simmering for 20 minutes. Now add in the washed and roughly-chopped sorrel and chickweed, milk and seasoning; bring to a simmer for a further 10 minutes. Serve with croutons, a dash of cream and garnish with a little shredded sorrel and whole chickweed sprigs



Laver consommé

Consommé is a clear soup, full of flavour, the clarity of which is achieved by use of egg whites. Laver – perhaps more familiar in the form of the traditional Welsh laver bread (not a bread!) – is superb as a flavouring for stock and for wrapping fish prior to cooking. Together with Jelly Ear Fungus and the green hair-like *ulva* species of mid-upper shore rocks (gutweed) it can be easily gathered all year round.

Serves 4

400g (14oz) laver
12 medium sized pieces of Jelly Ear Fungus
50g (1¾ oz) gutweed
4 egg whites
2 litres (3½ pt) water (or veg stock – if you just want intense seaweed flavour use plain water)
1 dessert spoon vegetable stock powder
Sea salt and pepper to taste

METHOD

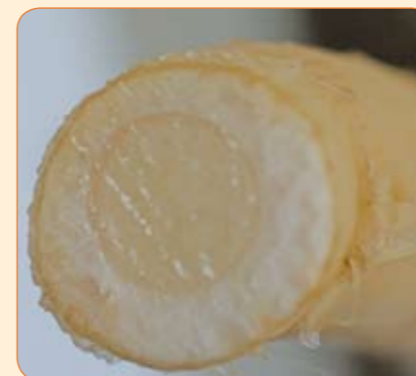
Thoroughly wash the laver to remove bits of sand and boil for an hour – topping up with boiling water every now and then to maintain the 2-litre quantity of water. Remove laver with a slotted spoon or tip liquid through a sieve and return (what is now) seaweed stock to pan. Add gutweed and boil until liquid is reduced in volume by half. Strain out the gutweed and put aside. Beat four egg whites in a bowl and whisk into the seaweed stock/soup. Bring to the boil for a few minutes stirring frequently. Pour through filter paper or a fine cloth to remove egg. Return (now clear) broth to a pan and add the seasoning, jelly ear fungus and gutweed. Simmer for five minutes and serve. Simmer for another 10 minutes before serving.



Reedmace and leek soup

Reedmace has a starchy rhizome that's an excellent potato alternative – starch-wise. It also has its own unique flavour. The garnish here can only be obtained from really robust and large over-wintering stems that have not flowered. Admittedly, they are quite hard (but by no means impossible) to come by. The plant can be found at pond and lake edges, in the water at the banks of slow-moving rivers, as well as in streams and dykes. Be sure to check that the water is clean and free from pollution before harvesting.

2 large leeks (500g/1lb 2oz)
100g (3½ oz) tender reedmace stem hearts
500g (1lb 2oz) starchy reedmace cores
1 clove of garlic
900ml (1½ pt) vegetable stock
225ml (8 floz) milk or single cream
A large knob of butter.
½ tsp black pepper
Sea salt to taste



Cross-section of whole reedmace rhizome showing the starchy core.



Cleaned reedmace rhizomes ready for core removal.

METHOD

Wash the whole rhizomes. Once clean, peel back the outer spongy part with a knife to leave the central cores. Cut into 2cm pieces with scissors or a knife. Place in a food processor with the cold vegetable stock. Blitz for a few minutes to break the fibres away from the starch, then pass through a fine sieve into a bowl.

Wash and finely chop the leeks and peel and slice the garlic. Gently fry these in a large knob of butter for a few minutes. Add the stock/reedmace starch, cream/milk and seasoning. Simmer for five minutes.

Meanwhile, cut the stem hearts into fine slithers and use to garnish. Serve with extra cream if desired.

Field Blewit and wild garlic soup

Wild garlic bulbs can be gathered anytime that the leaf isn't visible above ground (August – Early February). Field blewits are stimulated to grow by the first winter frosts and can be found from late October until March in short grass in parks, gardens, coastal areas etc.

1 tbsp vegetable oil
1 onion, peeled and chopped
500ml (18 floz) vegetable stock
200ml (7 floz) single cream
250g (9oz) fresh field blewits
30-40 average-sized wild garlic cloves, crushed (or 15 regular garlic bulbs)
Salt and pepper
2 tbsp freshly chopped parsley

METHOD

Heat the oil in a saucepan and gently cook the onion until soft but not coloured. Add the mushrooms and chopped garlic, cooking for 3-4 minutes until the mushrooms start to soften.

Add the stock and bring to the boil. Simmer for five minutes until tender. Add the cream, return to a simmer briefly then take off the heat. Add the chopped parsley. Liquidise and adjust seasoning as necessary.



Dandelion and burdock coffee

Roasted burdock root coffee is good and so is dandelion root coffee. One could make dandelion and burdock beer, of course – delicious as it is – but this is much simpler.

A good-sized pile of cleaned and scrubbed burdock roots
A similar-sized pile of clean and scrubbed dandelion roots

METHOD

Cut the roots into thin strips and lay on newspaper for a few weeks in a warm and dry place until they are completely dry. Place dried roots in a tray and roast at 220°C (425°F, gas 7) for approximately 30 minutes or until dark brown – but not burnt. Grind to a powder in a coffee grinder. Make using a cafetière or, as I did, by taking up the Greek method – by putting two dessert spoons of coffee powder in a little pot with some sugar and water, and then bringing to the boil. Add milk or cream if desired.

