



**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)

# T'riffic triffids!

**Fergus Drennan** continues to live entirely from foraged food with a wild giant!



**T**here are few wild foods that are so versatile that they don't just 'work', but work *really well* in every single one of the following ways – ways I've personally tested for success: in sweet crumbles, tarts and pies, for jam and marmalade, salad dressing, sorbets, ice-cream, yoghurt, cordial, syrup, 'fruit' leather, as candied stems, boiled sweets, for wine and beer, soup, smoothies, pickles, sweet and savoury sauces, chutney, cakes, biscuits, tea – hot or cold and as a vegetable – especially when cooked with pork or game.

In fact, there's no other wild food I'd recommend for such varied usage, not only because there are few such plants to recommend, but also due to the inevitable sustainability implications involved. However, as regards this modern-day triffid, given certain caveats, it could be argued that by consuming it regularly you're doing a service to the goal of increasing biodiversity; that plant is the notoriously invasive Japanese Knotweed.

Japanese Knotweed (*Polygonum japonicum*) can be found along riverbanks, on wasteground

and by roadsides throughout the country. The young stems can be harvested between March and May, then cooked and used for both sweet and savoury dishes. The plant was introduced into Britain from Japan in the early 19th century and is now regarded as the most perniciously invasive weed in the land! Fast growing, it can reach 3m in height, producing dense monoculture thickets. The edible but tasteless alternate, dark-green leaves grow from a semi-woody hollow stem with enlarged nodes.

## A 'strong plant'

The Japanese call it Itadori, 'strong plant', usually eating it stir-fried. The spring shoots can be used as a vegetable – as a sharper-tasting asparagus substitute or as a good accompaniment to rabbit and other game dishes once slightly sweetened. However, given that the cooked stem tastes remarkably like rhubarb, I tend to use it in similar ways.

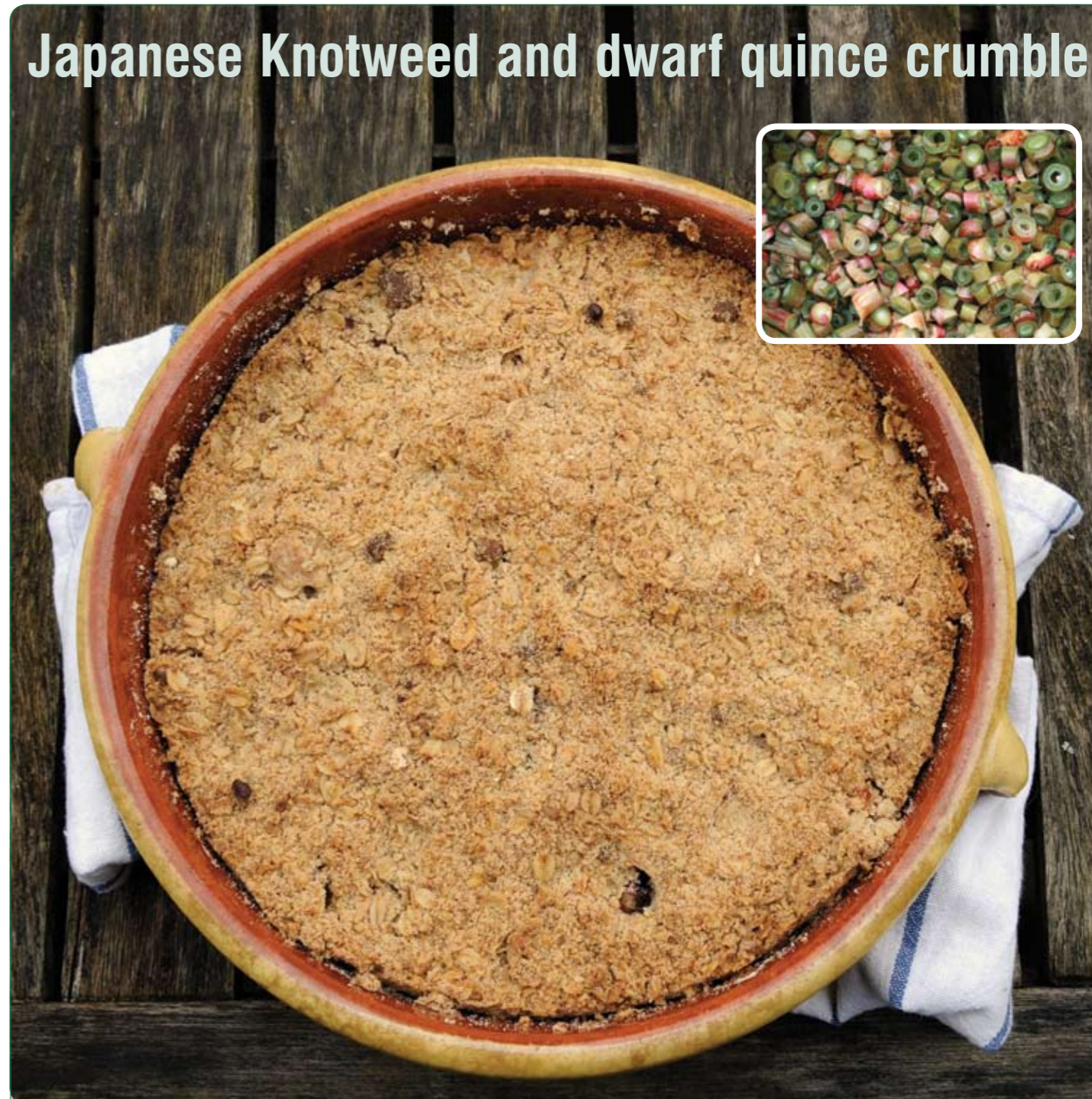
To ensure that you pick only tender stems, bend back from the top of the plant. Like asparagus, it should snap at the tender point leaving you with a piece between 2-20 cm long.

Only eat small quantities or none if suffering from gout – a condition aggravated by the oxalic acid responsible for the plant's characteristic flavour.

Another health consideration is the potential for herbicide contamination. Toxic glyphosate herbicides such as Roundup, those based on 2,4-D and the less toxic picloram-based herbicides are used to eradicate knotweed – if the plants you are collecting are not on your land check whether they have been treated with these products and of course, ask for permission to gather them. Finally, it's technically illegal to cause the plant's spread, therefore all off-cuts should be burnt, boiled or allowed to dry out completely – not thrown in the bin or composted. However, if off-cuts from cooking are disposed of sensibly and a colony's new growth harvested completely over succeeding years, the root system will become exhausted and die: a case of eat it and kill it, not kill it and eat it!

Here are a few of my favourite Japanese Knotweed recipes. In terms of ingredients, the first, using dwarf quinces, marries winter to spring, the second, using strawberries marries spring to summer.

## Japanese Knotweed and dwarf quince crumble



Many people have dwarf quince in their garden yet rarely use the fruit. Once fallen in October/November, because they are so hard they can stay firm and usable till as late as April – but not always. The fun and challenge here is to get both the knotweed and quince together. It's possible every couple of years. If you don't have any ask your neighbours, with the promise that you'll cook them something delicious in return.

### Serves 6 Filling

0.9kg (2lb) Japanese Knotweed stems (about 15 x 26cm (10") stems)  
454g (1lb) dwarf quince (about 4) or cooking apples  
575ml (1pt) water  
57-113g (2-4 oz) brown sugar  
A small piece of ginger

### Crumble

227g (8oz) plain flour  
85g (3oz) rolled oats  
113g (4oz) unsalted butter  
170g (6oz) brown sugar

### METHOD

Remove the leaf then roughly chop about 15 26cm long new stems of Japanese Knotweed. Peel, core and slice four medium-sized dwarf quince. Simmer both ingredients in a pint of water after adding approximately 2-4oz of sugar and a small, finely chopped, piece of ginger. Simmer for five minutes.

In the meantime rub together the flour and butter to form a crumb consistency. Mix in the rolled oats and sugar. Place fruit and stewing juices in a bowl, evenly cover with crumble mixture and bake in an oven at 180°C (350°F, gas 4) 30 minutes. Serve hot or cold with custard or crème fraiche.



## Pot roast pheasant with Japanese knotweed, chestnuts and wild mushrooms

### Serves 2-4

- 1 large, skinned 2-3-day hung hen pheasant
- 2 large handful mixed wild greens, such as sea beet, charlock, wild garlic, chickweed
- 2 cloves garlic
- ½ medium-sized red cabbage
- 10 x 26cm (10") knotweed stems
- Large handful dried/frozen/vacuum packed chestnuts
- Large handful dried mixed wild mushrooms
- 6 peeled shallots
- 2 large glasses red wine – preferably blackberry and elderberry
- 270ml (½ pt) vegetable or chicken stock
- 2-3 tbsp olive oil
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

### METHOD

Preheat the oven to 150°C (300°F, gas 2). Stuff the pheasant with the chopped wild greens and garlic. In the pot lay the knotweed stems on a base of chopped red cabbage. Add the chestnuts, mushrooms and shallots. Place the stuffed pheasant on top and pour over the wine, stock and oil then season. Put the lid on and roast until tender – about two hours. Serve with roast potatoes.

Knotweed is layered onto red cabbage



Dried wild mushrooms and chestnuts are added



The stuffed pheasant is placed on top and the liquid added



## Nettle and yarrow beer

- 1 gallon of water – preferably spring water
- 750g (1.6lb) young nettle tops
- 250g (9oz) fresh yarrow leaf
- 100g (3½ oz) ground ivy
- 100g (3½ oz) mugwort
- 100g (3½ oz) white horehound
- 900g (2 lbs) sugar
- 500g (1.1lb) malt extract
- 25g (1oz) cream of tartar
- 1 sachet of beer yeast

### METHOD

Put all the plants in a large pan. Add the water and simmer for five minutes then stand for half an hour. Strain the liquid into a clean pan; add the sugar, malt extract and cream of tartar. Stir and boil for two minutes; remove any scum. Cover and leave to cool until warm. Pour into a sterilized bucket and add the yeast. Leave in a warm place for a week, then divide the beer between sterilised beer bottles.

Before pouring it in, put a teaspoon of sugar in each bottle – this is to develop a lovely fizzy beer. Cork the bottles and tie down the cork, alternatively use screw tops. Leave at room temperature for three weeks before opening.



## Knotweed and strawberry wine

- 0.9kg (2lb) Japanese Knotweed
- 0.9kg (2lb) strawberries
- 1.134kg (2½ lb) white sugar
- 1 tsp yeast nutrient
- 4.5l (1 gallon) water
- Pectic enzyme
- Wine yeast

### METHOD

Simmer the strawberries and knotweed in the water for 10 minutes then mash. Allow to cool then strain through a pillowcase or piece of muslin, squeezing out as much liquid as possible. Return to a pan, add the sugar stirring to dissolve it then boil for five minutes.

Pour into a sterilised fermentation bucket. Cover and when cool add the pectic enzyme. 12 hours later add the yeast nutrient and yeast according to the packet's instructions. Leave covered in a warm place to ferment for four days. Pour into a sterilised demijohn and fit with an airlock. After a month rack it into another demijohn. Do this for four months. Finally, bottle and age for a year.

