

Wild Herbs & Weeds, Pot Herbs and *Quelites*

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Wild, edible greens are powerful, good food and offer a variety of flavors for free. Wise gardeners and farmers the world over use many of the plants that have successfully colonized the soil as beneficial allies. This is in sharp contrast to modern landscape and agriculture methods that strive to completely control the species of plants growing on the land, regarding all volunteers as weeds. In Europe the gentle word “potherb” is given to wild greens that offer the knowledgeable forager herbs for the cooking pot. In Mexico, indigenous farmers purposefully and selectively remove *mal monte* (bad wild) and retain *buen monte* (good wild) in the field. *Buen monte* is a plant that is useful for food, medicine, ceremonial purpose, soil enhancer or insect repellent. *Quelites* are volunteer plants with an edible quality. These *quelites*, according to *A Dictionary of New Mexico and Southern Colorado Spanish* by Rubén Cobos, Museum of New Mexico Press, Santa Fe, 1983, have been analyzed and have been found to contain vitamins and minerals that rival cultivated counterparts. Wild herbs and weeds do still flourish in the “waste places” and gardens in the Eastern United States despite our best efforts to be rid of them.

To be safe, harvest wild greens from areas that you know are not contaminated with toxic chemicals. The wild greens described in this handout are usually found growing as weeds in vegetable gardens.

To quickly capture the best flavor and nutrients, bring the greens to the kitchen as soon as they are harvested. Assemble a salad spinner or washing bowl, a cutting board and the compost bucket. Run 1 gallon of water into the spinner or bowl. Add about 1/4 cup distilled white or apple cider vinegar to the water.

Methodically pull the tender leaves from the stems. Pinch off leaves with yellow edges, brown or black spots. Discard wilted, spoiled or badly bug-eaten leaves in the compost bucket. Place the edible parts in the vinegar water as you work.

Stack the stems in a neat pile on the cutting board. Trim off the cut end of the stems and then slice them into bite-size pieces. Put the cut stems on top of the leaves and submerge the mass in the water, plunging up and down several times to loosen foreign matter. Let the greens soak in the water for several minutes, then lift them out and set them aside. Discard the vinegar water.

Next, refill the container with water and add 1/2 cup 3% hydrogen peroxide. Submerge the greens, and plunge them up and down in the hydrogen peroxide solution. Let them sit several minutes. Lift the leaves out and discard the water. Finish the cleaning process by rinsing the greens with clear water. Spin or dry the water from the ready-to-eat greens if you are going to store them in the refrigerator. This method of washing will remove dirt and food borne pathogens. The entire process takes about ten minutes.

Simply Delicious Summer Wild Greens

Enjoy eating greens while your body is nourished with fiber, calcium, chlorophyll, iron, vitamins A, C and E. They contain lutein and zeaxanthin which protect our aging eyes from macular degeneration. No vitamin or pharmaceutical pill offer as much benefit for so little investment as a big bowl of wild greens.

Serves two

About 2 quarts amaranth, chickweed, lamb's-quarters and/or purslane

About 2 cups tender stems cut into 3/4 inch pieces

1 tablespoon coconut, olive or peanut oil

1 Granny Smith apple, cored and chopped

1 medium onion, diced

2 or 3 large garlic cloves, minced

2 tablespoons soy sauce or tamari

2 tablespoons apple cider, rice or Balsamic vinegar

1/8 teaspoon grated nutmeg

Wash and prepare the greens as directed in the instructions above.

Heat a large Dutch oven, skillet or wok over medium heat and add the oil. Add the onion to the hot oil and sauté, stirring, for 2 minutes. Add the stems, apple, and garlic, stir, and sauté for 3 to 5 minutes. Add the leaves, cover and cook for about 2 minutes, until greens are wilted and apples and stems are tender.

Add the soy sauce or tamari, vinegar, and nutmeg, toss well, cover and cook for 1 to 2 minutes. Taste for seasoning; adjust with soy sauce or tamari, vinegar or salt. Serve hot with baked sweet potatoes and corn on the cob.

Knowing and Managing Wild Edibles

Amaranth, *Amaranthus hybridus* and *A. retroflexus* occur on cultivated or disturbed ground throughout the eastern United States. These two amaranth species are prolific annuals and have red or green leaves and stems. The leaves are oval-shaped, come to a point at the end and have smooth, wavy margins. The stems have short hairs. The flowers are born on spikes and are covered in short bristles; they are green or tinged in red.

A. hybridus is known by the common names princess feathers and red amaranth and is the preferred amaranth to gardeners. These plants often grow to be over six feet tall by the end of the growing season. They make stunning ornamental specimens though they tend to volunteer in the front of the border and in the cracks of sidewalks. Unwanted seedlings can and should be eaten.

A. retroflexus is called unflattering names such as pigweed and careless weed. It not a pleasant plant because it bears sharp stickers, produces progeny in large abundance and is not attractive to the gardener's eye. It grows no more than three feet tall. The thorns on young plants relax when cooked. Just wear gloves or use pliers to harvest the leaves.

During the spring the young leaves can be eaten raw or lightly cooked. If harvested before the seeds become ripe, the flower spikes can be prepared like broccoli. The ripe seed can be threshed into a paper sack and then ground and used as flour, popped (like popcorn), used in salad dressings or sprinkled on top of bread like poppy seeds. According to Rebecca Wood in *the new whole foods encyclopedia*, amaranth contains calcium, iron, protein, beta carotene and vitamin C.

Chickweed, *Media stellaria*, is a wild, cool season weed that volunteers in soils high in organic matter. It survives well into mid-summer in the shady parts of southern gardens but remains lush in sun and shade nearly all summer in northern climes. The plants form a sprawling mat, from a central stem, with fine, dense, shallow roots. The leaves are light green, almost opaque, opposite one another on the stem, short, broad at the base and pointed at the tip. The flowers are white and the green sepals form a five-pointed star. The stems are weak but grow very long and stay low to the ground. The greens have a mild spinach-like flavor, full of earthy minerals and taste best before the plant goes into flower. The best way to harvest chickweed for the greens pot or salad bowl is to snip the tips with scissors. This saves the cook from an inordinate amount of washing. Transplanting is not required since it comes up all over the place and reseeds freely. Chickweed is an anti-inflammatory herb used to externally to reduce itching though efficacy of folk uses have not been confirmed by science, according to *Eastern/Central Medicinal Plants* by Steven Foster and James A. Duke.

Lamb's-Quarters, *Chenopodium album*—While we are happy to have volunteers of any lamb's-quarters in our gardens, 'Magenta Spreen' lamb's-quarters are as showy as they are tasty; The light green leaves are tinged with bright fuchsia at their center base. The common lamb's-quarter leaves are blue-green on top and grey on the lower surfaces with soft, short fuzz. The leaves of both are shaped like goose feet, inspiring another common name for this common garden weed, 'goosefoot'. They alternate on the stems; short stems with small, entire leaves emerge from the base of the stems of the larger, older leaves. The stems and leaves are often tinted with red streaks. Both varieties can grow quite large, over six feet tall. The stems are branching and tend to sprawl late in the growing season. The smaller leaves remain tender until

the plant succumbs to frost. Lamb's-quarters provide us with vitamins C and E; the small leaves are good in salads or cooked and larger leaves can be cooked as greens, or added to the soup or bean pot. Deer browse lamb's-quarters but always leave enough for us to eat throughout the entire summer. According to *Eastern/Central Medicinal Plants* by Steven Foster and James A. Duke, Native Americans used the herb to treat stomachache and the cold tea was used to treat diarrhea.

Purslane, *Portulaca oleracea* is one of the most under-appreciated herbs in the garden. As a wild food, the flavor is slightly sour, with a lemony taste. The leaves are succulent, oblong and oval, hairless and without points. All above-ground parts are crisp on the outside and mucilaginous in the middle. The stems make a great bread and butter pickle. Purslane can be eaten raw, fresh from the garden. It beats out all green vegetables as a source of omega-3 fatty acids and also contains chlorophyll, vitamins A and C, iron, and is low in calories and fat. The seeds can be used in place of poppy seed in salad dressings and on breads. In the garden, it is a green cover crop and living mulch. The plants germinate during the late spring and early summer. They stay low to the ground, forming mats of moisture-retaining stems and foliage that keeps less desirable volunteers from germinating. The plant will reach a height of about 8 inches when it is in full flower; the small yellow blooms open in the cool of the morning and on cloudy days. As the plants grow, cut the stems that crowd other garden plants. The mucilage is a cooling first-aid for minor burns.

Bibliography

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