



# wild food

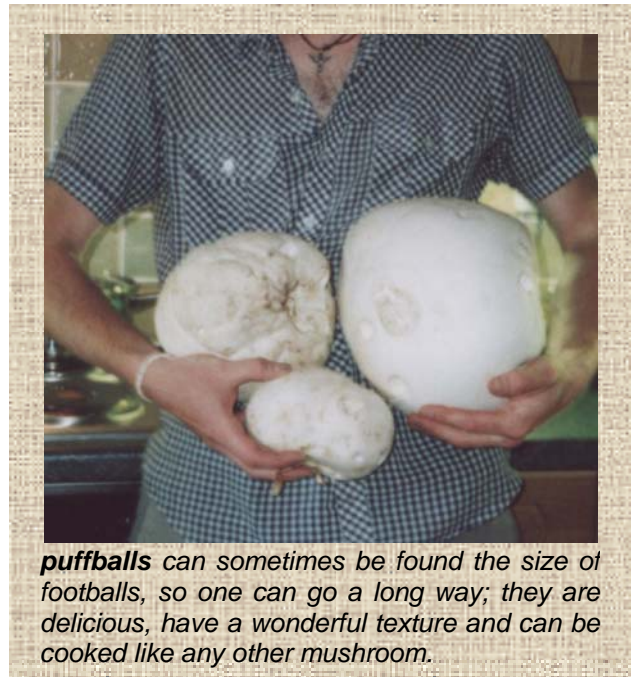


## what is it?

It is anything edible that has had no management to increase its production. This can include plants (leaves, berries, nuts or sap), fungi or animals. Wild food was once necessary for human survival, but now most traditional knowledge of wild food has been lost. Many of the plant species that we view as weeds are edible and nutritious - modern farming favours foods that have been cultivated from their wild ancestors. We clear away 'weeds' to grow crops, yet many wild plants are more nutritious than their cultivated counterparts. For example the edible wild plant 'fat hen' contains more iron and protein than spinach, and more vitamin B and calcium than cabbage. As with many other wild foods it can also be cooked in the same way as the vegetables we regularly eat. Wild food plants and fungi form a part of the rich diversity of species that is vital to the functioning of ecosystems. Many of these species are being lost due to habitat destruction and pollution.

Collecting wild food is much more popular in continental Europe. In one region of Finland 68% of households pick wild fungi for consumption - unimaginable here in Britain.

The subject also includes fishing and harvesting seafood, but this is a topic for a separate factsheet.



***puffballs** can sometimes be found the size of footballs, so one can go a long way; they are delicious, have a wonderful texture and can be cooked like any other mushroom.*

## what are the benefits?

As long as we are sensitive when collecting wild food and consider other species, harvesting wild food can be beneficial to the environment. Wild food has no packaging, no chemicals to force it to grow, and can be picked local to your area, minimising food miles and pollution from vehicle exhausts. Picking wild food in moderation can foster appreciation of nature, resulting in greater conservation of species. Eating a range of different species maintains biodiversity - the opposite of our intensive farming system, where we grow crops in monocultures, with damaging effects for the environment. Target species are favoured over wild species, and are grown intensively using pesticides, which can have detrimental effects on wildlife. Many of the wild animals that can be eaten are pests that have to be controlled and are often wasted. One example is the grey squirrel, a tasty introduced species that causes damage to tree saplings in woodlands, and outcompetes our native red squirrel. If they are to be culled, isn't it better to eat them in preference to animals that may have been fed intensively-grown crops, housed indoors, pumped with antibiotics and transported many miles to reach your plate? Consuming wild food can instill a greater respect for the environment, reconnecting us to the origins of our food, and illustrating our dependency on nature for



***nettle omelette:** many wild foods can be cooked in the same way as the cultivated vegetables that we are used to eating. There are many recipes for wild foods in the books in the 'resources' section.*



survival. It also highlights the importance of seasonality and offers an alternative to our current globalised food system, where we can buy anything at anytime of the year.

There are health benefits too, as seasonal food matches the body's needs. For example the leafy greens that arise in spring are good for renewal after the winter, and clean out the digestive tract. Our prehistoric ancestors browsed on wild foods from their local area, gaining the nutrients needed for healthy immune systems. Collecting wild foods is also thought to have a therapeutic value and is a great incentive to enjoy the countryside.

## what can I do?

Foraging for wild food is exciting, as you never know what you are going to find. Wild plants and fungi grow in many places, even on wasteland in towns. Wild food is not only free but has also grown without us having to do any work. Anyone can pick their own wild plants and fungi; however there are some simple principles that must be followed. If you are a beginner, try picking obvious species that you are already familiar with - for example nettles or dandelions. Never eat any species that you are unsure of. Remember that many species are poisonous and some must be cooked to remove toxins. Get a good identification book and go out with an expert on a local foray or course. Under the Wildlife and Countryside act (1981) it is illegal to uproot any species without permission from the landowner, and species must not be picked from a National Nature Reserve (NNR) or Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) without permission. Do not pick species near a roadside, or that may be contaminated with chemical sprays or manure. Only pick species that are growing in profusion and do not pick rare species (a list can be obtained from [bsbi.org.uk/Code\\_of\\_Conduct.htm](http://bsbi.org.uk/Code_of_Conduct.htm)).

Damage the plants as little as possible and be very careful about trampling other species. Only pick enough for you to eat, and leave plenty for other wildlife. If you are interested in wild game then check out an agricultural college to see what courses they have on offer.

## resources

### books

- Carluccio, A, 2001, *Antonio Carluccio Goes Wild*, Headline Book Publishing, London
- Mabey, R, 2001, *Food for Free*, Harper Collins Publishers, London
- Phillips, R, 1983, *Wild Food*, Pan Macmillan Ltd, London
- Phillips, R, 2004, *Mushrooms and Other Fungi of Great Britain and Europe*, Pan Macmillan Ltd, London
- Rose, F, 1991, *The Wildflower Key*, Penguin Books Ltd, Middlesex

### courses

- [countrylovers.co.uk/wildfoodjj/rwfgwfs.htm](http://countrylovers.co.uk/wildfoodjj/rwfgwfs.htm) - The Wild Food School, Cornwall
- [wildlifetrusts.org](http://wildlifetrusts.org) - local Wildlife Trusts run forays or guided walks
- wild food courses at 'Woodsmoke' - a bushcraft centre in the Lake District - 01900 821733 [woodsmoke.uk.com](http://woodsmoke.uk.com)

### codes of conduct

- contact English Nature's enquiry service for a copy of *The Wild Mushroom Pickers Code of Conduct* and *The Code of Conduct for the Conservation and Enjoyment of Wild Plants*. +44 (0)1733 455101 [enquiries@english-nature.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@english-nature.org.uk)



**wild garlic** (or ramsons) is thought to be healthier than cultivated garlic due to its green pigment chlorophyll. It grows in abundance in spring, giving off a strong smell. It is delicious in salads or used as a flavouring in cooking.

Contact us or visit our website to find out more about our factsheets, books, courses, online shop, links, forum, events and volunteering on organic farms. You can also become a 'Friend of LILI', and receive our e-newsletter, discounts on our courses, and help us to make a difference.

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