

A passion for foraging



Colin Wheeler-James, founder of the Ground up Cookery School in Crockernwell, Devon, shares his passion, knowledge and calendar for foraging. With an abundance of natural produce out there, why not give it go?

I'm not saying we hadn't thought about opening a cookery school but when the chance came along to rent a space on a farm less than a mile from our house, we jumped at it. Truth be told, we were not really ready, but then again are you ever? Taking the first step into something new is always the hard part!

"What will we teach?" Quite an obvious first question I suppose, but the answer was far less clear. I wanted course content to be something we were passionate and knowledgeable about and my wife was very clear we had to offer something a bit different to the already well-established courses in our area down here in the South West.

Foraging was the first thing I decided we should

add to the course curriculum, not just because it was becoming trendy but because it has long been an extension to my chef's palate of flavours and textures that I use in my food.

I love the seasonality of wild food, waiting patiently for it to be ready, knowing your local terroir well enough to pinpoint the places it will appear first (and last), noticing the subtle differences in the timings year on year and fully embracing each seasonal change and celebrating that resource to the full when it's at its glorious best. This soon becomes a natural rhythm to the whole year where one favourite rolls into the next. Here are some of my favourite ingredients from the annual cycle:



JANUARY For me this month is synonymous with three ingredients. Velvet shank mushrooms, a superb eating mushroom with a sweet taste, and two of my favourite greens, hairy bittercress and sea beet. Heading to the coast

from our base high up on the edge of Dartmoor can mean finding fresh growth up to six weeks earlier than only 15 miles inland, so a trip to the coast in January is always on the cards!

Sea beet is a fabulous green with a great texture, its leaves are similar to spinach but thicker and succulent.

Hairy bittercress is a beautiful leaf. It's a mild peppery flavour similar to wild rocket but much more beautiful and the perfect garnish for any dish. It's really easy to find too. If you grow your own veg or have a gravel path or driveway, I can pretty much guarantee you will have it in your garden!



FEBRUARY Garlic mustard or 'Jack by the hedge', as it's known down here, is starting to show. The glorious Devon hedges that best represent this part of the country are fabulous spots to find early greens at their base in sheltered aspects. Simply by foraging on the south side in

early season and the north side later in the season can result in the same species, sometimes only a metre apart, being ready a month later in its cycle due to the additional sunlight and shelter from cold northerly or easterly winds. Garlic mustard has a much more subtle garlic flavour than wild garlic and you cook it just as you would any other leafy green.

Alexanders and three-cornered leek, both sensationally tasty plants, are also starting to show. I particularly like Alexanders leaves in sauerkraut and the seeds and dried powdered root are great for seasoning – a truly unique flavour; aniseed, celery, soap... Wow!

Three-cornered leek is a glorious plant. Whizz it up in oil for a beautiful vibrant dressing, use in frittata or simply steam.



MARCH Jelly ear and scarlett elf cups are two fabulous fungi that are in their pomp here in March. They're often found much earlier in other areas of the country and even the county! These unusual fungi are a treasure. Scarlett elf cups grow mainly in damp deciduous woodland, usually on a moss-covered

fallen log, and are best eaten raw or lightly cooked to retain their colour.

Jelly ears are most commonly found growing on elder. These fungi are a bit of a challenge from a texture perspective and are often used in Asian noodle broths and the like. I like to soak them in gin with elderflowers (they grow on elder after all!) and then pat dry and cover in white chocolate and, of course, I drink the gin!

Talking of drinks, this is birch sap season and silver birch around the country will be tapped for this tasty liquor, which tastes like pure, clear water. Most people use this to make syrup but with a sugar content of around 2-3%, compared with the more familiar Canadian maple syrup with a sugar content of 8-10%, means you don't end up with much after a lot of reducing!



APRIL Oh, the excitement! Wild garlic season is upon us. After blackberries, I expect this is the most commonly recognised and foraged plant and probably most celebrated in the foraging calendar. I ferment the leaves, make fermented capers with the flower buds, make pesto, dry the open flowers, make pickled capers with the seeds and make wild garlic ash with the flower stems... and eat it fresh in just about anything, though I find it pairs particularly well with eggs.

Nettles are now lush and bushy with new growth. They're maybe a bit of an obvious choice but one that, like the wild garlic, offers so much flexibility and great flavour, with the added benefit of being an absolute nutritional powerhouse! Pick early or late in the season to avoid the flowering stems. Did you know that nettle seeds are a natural stimulant and can have a similar effect on your body to caffeine?

Talking of caffeine, dandelions are now growing well. The early spring leaves are among the tastiest and sweetest of the year. Worthy point to note on dandelions; if harvesting later in the year, the more sunshine the plant gets, the more bitter the taste, so try and pick in a sheltered spot. Dried and ground dandelion root makes a very good coffee alternative.



MAY Corn salad is abundant now with its nutty and refreshing taste. Also known as lambs lettuce, it has been a go-to salad leaf for chefs for a long time, but once freshly picked I doubt you will buy a punnet again.

Beautiful iridescent lime green beech leaves are flooding the forest canopy this month. Pick them young and eat raw in salads or soak in gin as the first step in making the fabulous aperitif 'Noyau'.

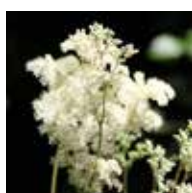
Gorse is in full flower too. The beautiful yellow flowers give off a strong scent of coconut in the warm sun. Use to make panna cotta or ice cream or just sprinkle on spring salads.



JUNE Green walnuts are fattening up. As long as you can easily poke a pin or the tines of a fork through them and not feel the shell forming, you can brine and pickle them for the perfect Christmas pickle. Be warned though, wear gloves.

The aromatic and sticky liquor that seeps from them stains your hands for weeks!

Wood sorrel is wonderful this month. A taste of green apple peel really gets the juices flowing in your mouth. This is due to the oxalic acid in the plant, the same compound found in rhubarb leaves. Not actually a member of the sorrel family at all, it's an oxalis and a beautiful garnish. Yarrow, a plant more commonly used for its medicinal properties than its culinary ones, is nevertheless still on my list. The young intricately feathered leaves are a beautiful garnish and the heady aromatic flavour works so well with Asian flavours of soy, ginger and lemongrass.



JULY Wild strawberries are hiding in the undergrowth on sheltered banks and in dappled shade in the woods. These intensely perfumed tiny berries are a flavour powerhouse but remarkably, each berry can taste completely different from the one next to it, even on the same plant.

Meadowsweet, the perfect representation of the smell of summer, is heady and sweet. This wonderful plant is superb in flavouring spirits and desserts and is lovely added to some strawberry jam!

Back to the coast for some sea greens; gut weed and sea lettuce are super abundant seaweed and wonderful to eat – raw, deep fried, in stews or stir fries – fabulous stuff!



AUGUST Now we are in the season of the cep or penny bun, a boletus mushroom that we are all familiar with. It's simply one of the best edible mushrooms there is. I love to eat them but equally I find them a fabulous source of umami so every year I dry and powder (sometimes, smoking

first) to use as seasoning.

August also sees the blackberry season in full swing. I don't think I know anyone who hasn't picked a ripe blackberry. Most folks' first foraged food! There is a myriad of uses for this abundant fruit but for something different I also use the unopened flower heads to salt and pickle to make capers, they taste a little like artichoke.

If you live in an area with acidic soil or near a conifer plantation you may be lucky enough to collect bilberries, also known as blaeberrys or whinberries, or down here, whortleberries. Similar to a blueberry but with a much deeper intense and less sweet taste, these berries are really worth seeking out. A simple pastry case lined with crème pâtissière and topped with whortleberries is a wonderful thing!



SEPTEMBER Time to collect my favourite wild spice; common hogweed seeds. They have a wonderful citrus flavour with added spice, notes of cardamom and mace. A wonderful seed for flavouring pickles and chutneys or for drying and grinding and using in baking. Parkin and shortbread

are two favourites recipes of mine to use it in.

Sea buckthorn is now producing its myriad of sour bright orange berries, an ingredient that has become commonly used in professional kitchens in recent years. This tart, sour but hugely tasty berry is worth seeking out.

Parasol mushrooms are starting to rear up out of the pasturelands and parks around the county. These elegant mushrooms are great pan-fried or fermented as a base to make a mushroom ketchup.



OCTOBER Apples. Scrumpy, that is all.

Actually it's not, apples are the base of so much from chutney to fruit leather, through to desserts and alcohol. What a pity they only crop once a year! Blackthorn or sloe is ready to pick, traditionally not picked until after the first frost

but I tend to pick them now or they will all be gone by the time a frost arrives. Traditionally used to make sloe gin, I also make a syrup with them which is very versatile – a splash in a glass of fizz to make a wild Kir, drizzle over ice cream or waffles or use to flavour a fruit crumble.

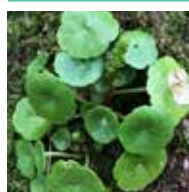
Beech nuts are also now in season. These pretty, elongated triangular-shaped nuts are worth the effort required to open them. Lovely and sweet and great in banana bread.



NOVEMBER Oak Moss is a fungus that looks like a lichen and is found growing on trees, walls and other surfaces. It doesn't have a lot of flavour but it's very beautiful added to a plate. Deep fried and dusted with a smoked cep and dried laver salt, it's a great garnish.

Rose hips are ripening. They make a great syrup which can be used to flavour a range of dishes or to ease coughing caused by the onset of seasonal sniffles.

Haws are ripe and plump. The fruit from the hawthorn has a lovely fresh mango-like colour and if cooked and puréed with a bit of spice and seasoning, it makes a delicious ketchup.



DECEMBER There are still some greens around, black mustard is good at this time of year and can be used in a variety of ways.

I am often to be found digging up burdock root at this time of year. Dig up and peel like a carrot, keep in a bowl of acidulated water to prevent discolouring and use in stir fries or stews or to flavour spirits. Dark rum in particular works well with Burdock.

Navel wort is a fabulously crunchy and juicy evergreen that will be loving the likely wet weather in mid-winter. It's succulent, juicy and architecturally stunning, a real winter treasure!

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL WELLBEING

Foraging is great. Being out in the countryside and forcing yourself to slow down and really see what's around you is well known as a soothing tonic to aid mental and physical wellbeing. Don't be intimidated by foraging for your own food. Learn one plant at a time and always make certain you are sure of your identification before consuming.

Please take the time to learn fungi and the Apiaceae family (wild carrot family, which includes hogweed, Alexanders, Hemlock, cow parsley etc.) from an expert as they can be fatal if you ingest the wrong ones. But, they are stunning when you get the right ones!

Do take the time to learn the dos and don'ts of foraging, including the law around harvesting wild plants. But, make sure you do have a go – a dog walk will never be the same again! I swear my dog actually sighs at me when I stop mid-walk to stare in a hedge.

If you want to find out more about us and our school please take a look at our website: www.groundupcookeryschool.co.uk or follow us on Instagram, Twitter or Facebook @groundupcookery