

Taste and Nutrition - Right in Your Own Backyard

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One thing that we are particularly talented at growing in our yard is “wildflowers”. “Weeds” would be a more accurate description, but this euphemism seems so much more sophisticated, and raises them above the more common vegetation that grows elsewhere.

Knowing that early settlers and native North Americans made considerable use of wildflowers often leads me to wonder about these plants while riding around on the lawnmower. Plantain, chicory, and Queen Anne’s lace all have fascinating properties and applications. Even the ever-present dandelion, honoured each year by a festival in Kemptville, has many uses, and a “colourful” history. Now, all of a sudden, cutting the lawn has become a learning experience.

The name dandelion derives its name from the Old French “dent de lion” since its jagged-edged leaves resemble the teeth of a lion. These leaves are quite nutritious and can be enjoyed in salads, if they are young and not too bitter. They can also be steamed or boiled, much like other leafy greens. According to some sources, the dandelion’s white sap can be applied to heal wounds or soothe bee stings. Dandelion roots, when roasted and ground, can be brewed to make an acceptable coffee substitute. Then, of course, we cannot forget dandelion wine.

Dandelion tonic has been credited with saving the lives of pioneers during harsh winters when there was little food available. This was due to its high vitamin content.

Chicory roots can also be dried, roasted, and ground to make a non-caffeinated coffee substitute. Chicory has even been used in commercial coffee blends as an extender. When blended with regular coffee grounds, it adds a rich, mellow flavour and reduces the caffeine level. The characteristic blue flowers can be eaten in salads, as can the leafy portions of the plant.

Queen Anne’s lace is actually one of the earliest members of the carrot family. When pulling them from a lawn or garden, you may notice a typical carrot aroma. The roots of young plants can be eaten just like carrots. This plant spread across North America as the result of carrots from the gardens of early settlers going wild and reverting back to their original form.

Young plantain leaves can be used in salads, while older leaves can be cooked and eaten as a vegetable. The leaves are also said to soothe cuts, burns, and insect bites.

Edible plants are not just limited to wildflowers. Some of the flowers commonly grown

in ornamental gardens are also appealing. My first encounter with edible flowers was about fifteen years ago. While at a conference, we were served a salad of dandelion greens and baby spinach garnished with brightly coloured nasturtiums and the smiling faces of pansy flowers. The somewhat sweet and peppery nasturtiums were delightful, as were the pleasantly aromatic, almost minty pansies. The flavour of pansies can vary with some having a tanginess to them.

Searching on the internet, one can find imaginative ways of incorporating edible flowers into cake decorating and hors d'oeuvres. One particularly appealing idea is freezing pansies into the centre of ice cubes to be floated in punch bowls or used in cocktails. Another internet contributor puts them in frozen treats for her children.

Before experimenting with edible wildflowers and garden flowers, a few simple precautions must be taken. Under no circumstances should any undue risks be taken. First and foremost, you need to be able to identify the plant and know whether all or only certain parts of it are edible. Some plants are toxic and need to be avoided. There are cases where only young plants should be eaten or where plants should be avoided at certain times of the year. All this is far beyond the scope of a short newspaper article. Reliable references should always be consulted. An excellent resource is "Ontario Wildflowers" by Linda Kershaw (Lone Pine Publishing, Edmonton, Alberta, 2002). Ms. Kershaw details over 100 wayside flowers in a highly readable manner.

A second serious consideration is allergies and other sensitivities or intolerances to certain plants. Some plants should not even be touched, as is the case with stinging nettles. The tiny hairs on the plant are hollow and contain formic acid. If these hairs pierce your skin when you touch them, the formic acid (which is what makes ant bites sting so much as well) immediately causes a burning or stinging reaction. This sensation usually lasts an hour or so, but it can persist for as long as a few days. After several unpleasant encounters with a few stinging nettles, both my wife and I now make sure to wear heavy gloves when working in that area of the yard.

You should also know the source of the wildflowers you are about to eat. Where were they grown and under what conditions? This makes your own backyard one of the more trustworthy sites.

So the next time you are cutting your lawn or walking along a country trail, you might want to pause for a moment to admire the wide variety of wildflowers. Try to think of them as more than pretty flowers or just pesky weeds.



One of the numerous photogenic dandelions in our backyard



Pansies can be frozen in ice cubes for punches and cocktails