

Everything Is Food

Here is a selection of some edible and useful plants growing in abundance around the Sheffield area. I apologise for not including photos – I recommend proper identification from someone who knows the plants although many good books are around and the internet is bound to have photos. I have tried things which I mistook for edible and it has resulted in me discovering some of the most foul tastes known to humanity! (I have also found some of the best...) I believe we all have instinctive knowledge embedded in our mind which tells us what is edible and what is poisonous, but often that instinct is hard to find (uncover) purely since most of us haven't grown up around plants, so a level of caution is always a good thing when trying something new in your diet. As we gradually reconnect to plants the instinct becomes uncovered and we can trust our own judgement. One thing: if it tastes horrible it's not likely to be edible and welcomed by the body.

The title for this article (Everything Is Food) is just saying that everything contains gifts, for body, mind and soul. This writing is focused on those edible gifts of nature which are free and easily accessible to all. The greatest free gift of plants is oxygen. Every time we breathe we are connected to all plant life on the planet and without that plant life there would be no human life. So as we breathe together sharing one of Nature's finest gifts here is a list of some of Nature's other fine gifts which we can all share, and through sharing connect more deeply with ourselves, one another and the universe.

Latin names have been included to aid identification.

TREES

Yew, *Taxus baccata* Every part of this tree is poisonous except for the flesh around the berries. It is common all over in parks, gardens, woods and especially graveyards. The seed within the fruit is poisonous but provided you don't chew it there is no harm in swallowing it. It will pass through you undigested. I suck the flesh off then spit out the seed.

It tastes like jelly and ice cream combined!

Oak, *Quercus spp.* The young bright green leaves can be eaten as a medicine or

left in water for a day to make a tasty drink. I gave some oak infused water to a friend who was so impressed by the flavour and refreshing feel. He said it tasted like mild pear juice and could be sold for vast quantities of money...just oak leaves in water!

In autumn gather acorns. A few can be eaten raw or cooked. If you grind them and rinse

out the tannins (the bitter flavour) they can be eaten in larger quantities though I haven't

tried this. There are some oaks which have much lower tannins and can be eaten in quantity without needing to rinse them out – so if you find any of these trees please let me know.

Elder, *Sambucus nigra* I eat the young leaves in spring, the flowers in summer

and the berries in autumn. The flowers infuse water beautifully. This is probably the most popular use of the plant. The leaves are insect repellent – just grab some and rub them on

your skin! The birds love this tree and will eat the fruit if you don't. You can eat them raw

or with porridge etc or add them to jams or make juices or wine.

Beech, *Fagus spp.* Eat the young leaves in spring and add them to salads. The

nuts are tiny but edible.

Hawthorn, *Crataegus* The young leaves in spring are valuable food and the berries

are a good heart tonic.

Lime, *Tiliaceae* family Lime leaves are the best tree leaf to eat since you can eat it

in quantity. The taste is mild.

Pick while young. There are lots of lime trees in Sheffield to pick from but avoid those

on main roads (growing use your own judgement as to the quality of the food you pick

Sweet chestnut, *Castanea sativa* There are loads of these in woods but since they are shaded by other trees they don't crop that well. See if you can find one in the sun.

I found two really good trees in the botanical gardens. Chestnuts can be eaten raw (my usual choice) but most people cook them. If you pick lots then they will store well

if they are undamaged and dry. When they are dry soaking them is worth while.

Fruit trees Keep your eyes open for apple, pear, cherry and plum/damson trees, but especially apple. In the last year I have got food from about 15 – 20 fruit trees being

neglected or under used. As I am writing this there are some apples in my room from

three trees which were found on abandoned allotments. Now they have all vanished to

make way for student accommodation. Your neighbours might have a tree in their garden

which they just don't bother using, leaving the fruit for the birds.

SHRUBS

Wild Rose/Dog rose, *rosa spp.* This grows all over Sheffield, from the city centre to the country. The flowers can be eaten but the hips (fruit) are my favourite part. They can be picked in autumn and winter. There are cultivated roses which have fatter hips with more flesh but less intense flavour. I test out most of the rose hips I find. The flesh has to be soft to make pleasurable eating. **WARNING:** don't eat the pips/seeds (although I have on occasion). These have tiny fir like brushes on which can be an irritant to the gut (they have been used as an itching powder!) I have found that you can pull all the seeds out at once by their attachment to the little black bit on the bottom: tear the skin around this bit and pull gently, aiding the seeds out with a slight squeeze with the other hand. I gave some of this fruit to a child today and asked him what he thought of it. He said it tasted of sweets. I totally agree. Yummy snack while giving yourself a fat dose of vitamin C. I have tried making rose hip syrup but since it uses sugar and cooking in the process I don't bother. When I did make it however it was very popular with other members of my family!

Bilberry, *Vaccinium myrtillus* These are abundant on the heaths and moors surrounding Sheffield. Picking is time consuming but done with friends makes the task a chance to have a good chat and a summer break from the treadmill of nine to fives. It is difficult to gather any real quantity in a

short space of time so if time is food you'd be better off with black berries. Bilberries are brilliant for the eyes and improving vision.

GROUND COVERS

Brambles, Rubus spp.. Do I really need to tell you of the joys of blackberry picking? As the nights start to creep back in after a lazy July they start to ripen. I can usually pick them from August to November with quantities picked in September and October. I love them for breakfast. I go out picking with large plastic containers to my favoured spots or wander and explore through the woodland edges or clearings and simply graze on all the ripe ones (the ones which drop off in your hand) and any which are black but still slightly firm need leaving on a table (or fridge) for a few days to ripen off. I rarely wash them but that is since I trust the sources I pick from. I tend to avoid busy main road sides but I have picked them on the edge of a motorway service station! (The birds don't seem to mind them unwashed!) The best sources are woodland edges in parks and abandoned allotments in an urban environment. Out in the country most sources are safe and sound.

I go on picking until I want a change of food in my diet which on many occasions hasn't been until late afternoon. I often nibble on wild greens/herbs while I feast, since it helps to balance the sweet sugary flavour and protects my teeth somewhat from the acid build up. (Make sure they are ripe). If I find a good spot I can fill a large box (as well as my tummy) in about half an hour. Keep your eyes open for spots everywhere you go - especially around the full moons time in September/October. The early ones (August) will be found on sunny, sheltered, low lying south facing slopes. The late ones (October/November) will be found in shady, high north facing woods. Once you have found a spot it can be an ever returning source of tasty, nutritious, free food. I won't even go into the medicinal properties of the berries since I'd just be trying to convince you to eat them. One thing to be aware of: if you're not used to eating lots of fruit and fruit with seeds in then eating lots of blackberries may give you the runs initially since your gut is not used to the quantities of seeds in them. This will clear once your body has adjusted. If you pick more than you can eat (which isn't hard, even if you are a blackberryholic like me) give them to someone else - Little or big, old or young - Anyone will do!!

PERENNIAL GREENS

Wild garlic Allium Ursinum This grows through all the woods in spring. Very easily identified by its garlic smell. Use the leaves, flowers and unripe seed heads in salads. This is probably the most popular wild green and has endless medicinal properties. If you don't have time to pick it every day then

pick lots, wash and keep in fridge for extended use. This can be done with all leafy foods.

Dandelions *Taraxacum officinale* I LOVE dandelions. They do my body no end of good. I pick the leaves mainly in spring since they are so abundant and so welcome after winter for spring cleaning. The early spring leaves are the ones to go for you if you're not into bitterness. The leaves will wilt if you don't eat them the day you pick them but soaking them in water has recovered them for me. I use them in salads all the time. I work on allotments and when I dig up a large dandelion root I save it. The Chinese often use it for cooking. I usually just peel it and eat it raw provided it's not too bitter (some are Very bitter). I pick leaves in late summer for drying and using in winter. The roots are also easily dried and can be used for teas or soupy things.

Stinging Nettles, "Thank God for nettles" is what I say to myself when I feel its revitalising green juice travel through my veins!! Nettles are SO useful because they are SO good for you (even just as a medicine if not for a food) and they are SO abundant. Spring is again the best time for picking but also in autumn. As well as juicing (for which they are amazing) I dry them for use in the winter.

Just pick the heads – scissors are very useful but I rarely use gloves more out laziness and that I don't mind the odd sting (it will build up on the skin after a while even if you don't feel you're getting stung). I often pick just the very top and roll it between thumb and finger and pop it straight under my teeth and chew to remove sting. I once showed this technique to a bunch of kids who, as I was picking nettles, inquired into what I was doing. Some of them seemed a bit confused (Eating nettles?) but some seemed interested when I told them it was an excellent medicine. (The following day: "...so nettles are good for you?" I heard one shout as I cycled past...) This is one of the most used plants by herbalists.

Cleavers, Galium aparine Also know as goose grass and the one which you stick to people's clothes. As with nettles I tried it cooked first but then got into green juices for the feeling they give me. I juice it and eat it raw, but keep to the young softer growth for eating purposes. It may take a while to get used to the texture....

Yarrow, Achillea millefolium Often grows in grassy banks and gardens. Choose the young green growth for salads etc. I dry the leaves and the flowers for use in the winter. Good addition to a diet. The flowers. I use as a medicine.

Plantain, Plantago This grows in grassy banks and edges of woods. I eat the young leaves in salads in small amounts. The older leaves are tougher but can still be used as medicine. I pick this to dry and use in winter.

Sweet Cicely, Myrrhis odorata It ain't called Sweet for nothing! This is probably my joint favourite alongside dandelions. It is found in and around woodlands, often in clearings as well as grassy banks and verges as well as cultivated areas. The flavour is sweet and aniseed like. The leaves (Similar to cow parsley/ carrot leaves etc) can be picked in spring and again in late summer and even in the depths of January in places. (make sure they have the distinctive aniseed smell since there are poisonous plants with similar looks) When the plant is setting seed the young tender seed pods can be eaten as well. Like sweets.

Ground Elder, Aegopodium podagraria It was brought over to this country by the Romans as a vegetable plant and it has become "native/wild". I gave some to my dad and he said "why don't people eat this?" If only I knew the answer.... It is a super tasty food, superb in salads. It grows on woodland edges and especially around allotment sites. Do not mistake this with Dog's Mercury – not one you want to eat.

Chickweed, Stellaria media I harvest lots of this while weeding on the allotment and rarely have more than I can use – I juice excess amounts. This is to my tastes divine but to others like grass. I will happily eat it on its own but add it to salads for others to eat. You can find it in woods, grassy banks and fields etc In the Olden Days bags of chickweed were passed around the markets in town. As with all greens gathered in public places make sure you wash them properly.

Sorrel, Rumex spp.. This grows in grass lands, fields, parks etc. It has a lemony tang taste. A fun addition to salads: adds a bite. Best not to eat loads of this because of the oxalic acid content.

Cow parsley, *Anthriscus sylvestris* Use in the way you use parsley, though it has a different flavour altogether. It looks similar to sweet cicely and grows in similar conditions. Make sure you identify these two properly since there are two poisonous ones in the same family – hemlock and fools parsley.

Garlic Mustard, *Alliaria petiolata* This tastes unsurprisingly like garlic mustard. I've found it growing in the botanical gardens. It also is found in woods and by roadsides and hedges and gardens. I have seen tons of it growing out in the country further south but quantities can be found up here as well.

HERBS

Here are a few herbs that will probably be growing close by.

Rosemary I know of a rosemary hedge which you can run your hand through as you walk past. This herb is so abundant it would be silly to ever buy it. It grows all over the place in loads of peoples front gardens creeping out across pavements. If you plan to take lots for drying then ask the owner. I found a bush on an abandoned allotment and cut lots to give as gifts for people.

Mint There are many varieties of mint. It tends to creep through peoples gardens, invading beds and becoming a weed. I love it in salads.

Lavender I'm experimenting with making essential oils out of lavender so I'll get back to you on my findings. The word lavender comes from the meaning "to clean". I enjoy putting flowers in my pockets as well as pillow cases etc. This really does grow everywhere.

Comfrey, *symphytum officinale* This I've included mainly to rant about its amazing wound healing properties – chew up some leaves in your mouth and put the mixture on the cut or bruise or whatever. You'll be amazed. The young leaves are edible and a healthy addition to the diet. It can be found in and around allotment sites and well as cemeteries

There are loads more fascinating useful edible plants out there. Personally I feel I'm only at the first step.

I would love to hear from anyone who's really into foraging in Sheffield and their spots/areas and the way they use plants. If you want further information on identification, where I gather plants and at what time of year you can email me at maxsalad@googlemail.com