

Getting to Know Wild Plants

All wild plants that grow around us have a story to tell. As you pass by the hedgerow, look deep in to the nooks and crannies. This mass of green we pass by every day as we hurry to get on with our busy lives contains the medicines, foods, and tools of our ancestors. A multitude of edible plants, almost as many dye plants, even more medicines, and an abundance of plants with other practical uses reside there. Banished from our tidy gardens as 'weeds' these tough plants are well worth getting to know. By building a knowledge of these plants we deepen our relationship to our surroundings. Drawing us in to closely observe the subtle changes to plants such as Alexanders throughout the annual cycle, as we eat the leaves in the spring, the flowers in the summer, and then the seeds in the autumn. Notice the different microclimates on each side of a stone wall filled with pennywort and polypody hiding in the shade on one side and violets and hedge mustard growing towards to the sun on the other. Plan out your walks based on seasonal abundance, gathering foods, medicines, and materials for craft projects as you stride out.

Spring is a time for waking up. Spring is a time for new beginnings. For reaching out of our cosy burrows and meeting the world new again. On these early spring walks, we encounter fresh green edible plants such as wild garlic, three cornered leek, and Hedge Mustard. These low lying plants erupt from the ground, reaching to drink in the sun before the trees above shade them out. Their strong fiery flavours wake us up from the long darkness, emboldening us to reach out to the light also, firing up our metabolism and clearing our system. Watch out as wild garlic must not be mistaken with Arum Lily, a poisonous lookalike. This plant also had single blades of green emerging from the soil. While wild garlic has soft veins all moving up the leaf, the arum lily has a very distinctive vein all the way around the edge of the leaf. Although inedible the root of Arum Lily is a source of starch, historically used to starch nurses aprons.

Strong rooted plants such as nettles and comfrey crowd forth. Young nettles and some kinds of comfrey are great to eat as their deep roots have brought up rich minerals in the leaves. Their leaves are a source of pale green for natural dyeing. Chop up the leaves and soak them in hot water overnight. Simmer you fabric in this water to obtain a soft silvery green.

Along the hedgerow, you will start to see cleavers and ladies bedstraw raise their tangled heads. Looking superficially similar, these plants have quite different uses. Cleavers, also known as sticky willy is a bright green climbing plant with tiny white flowers in the summer. You often find it clinging to your clothes. This is fantastic in a tea or juiced, cleaning your lymphatic system in spring. Lady's Bedstraw is a darker green non-sticky lookalike with yellow flowers. It is a humble plant with a multitude of uses. Historically, it was used to stuff the mattresses of ladies to keep the insects away. The flowers are used for a yellow dye, while the roots of this plant make a red dye. It is also traditionally used for curdling milk in the production of cheese.

In the spring, there are over 50 wild plants you can eat. Individually, their flavour can be overpowering, however, as you combine these plants together in to a salad or a soup, the flavours become harmonious and sing.