



By Jacquelyn Dobrinska

On the Wild Side

Eat something wild every day and you may start to feel better. This was the wisdom of the late Frank C. Cook, an Asheville ethnobotanist, humanitarian and educator. He knew

that wild foods bring more than just needed nutrients. They return us to our wild and free nature.

Most of us recognize that the standard American diet, made up mostly of sugars, refined grains and new-fangled oils, is nutritionally poor and leads to many of the preventable chronic diseases that plague almost half of American adults. Yet, even if you are “healthy” and eat all your fruits and veggies, you may still be lacking necessary vitamins and minerals for optimal health.

“If you add a little something wild to your plate,” says Alan Muskat, wild foods educator and director of No Taste Like Home, “you’ll get almost double the nutritional value as a plate of salad.” No Taste Like Home offers foraging trips and classes in the Asheville area.

Domesticated vegetables are, well... domesticated. Natalie Bogwalker, director of Wild Abundance, a wild food, homesteading and primitive skills school based near Asheville, says that conventional produce has been bred for sugar and water content. “The sugar makes them more palatable and water is the cheapest way to get food to weigh more, as well as look pleasing on the shelves.”

To get better nutrition, eat produce that is closer to its wilder heritage. In the grocery store, this means

grabbing arugula rather than iceberg, getting berries instead of bananas and adding shiitake mushrooms to dishes.

In addition, we can add weeds to our diet. Weeds are not selectively bred and grow in soils that are not cultivated, so they still retain needed minerals. The easiest way to eat weeds is to eat dandelion greens or drink nettle tea.

Yet, focusing on nutrient content alone can be reductionist, warns Muskat. “In and of themselves, wild foods don’t have the same health benefits as foraging.” Going into the field has the added benefit of decreasing stress because free food saves money, identifying edible plants develops independence and recognizing the abundance helps us feel safe.

It also increases flexibility and variety. One doesn’t just find a recipe and get the needed ingredients. Instead, we find the food, and adapt recipes to what is in season. In June, that means mulberries, serviceberries, chicken of the woods, honeysuckle flower, sassafras leaf and milkweed flower buds. We also end up eating hundreds of kinds of foods, compared to the 12 that make up 90 percent of the American diet today.

Lastly, foraging is fun and delightful to the senses. Especially when you learn to prepare dishes properly, as few wild foods are super tasty when consumed raw.

Learn to identify wild plants from a seasoned expert, since relying on books can, at best, be a big waste of time and, at worst, be dangerous.

Try eating one wild thing every day and see how you feel.

This article contains general information and is not to be considered expert medical advice. Always consult your primary health provider before making changes. Jackie Dobrinska is a national wellness coach located in Asheville. Reach her at asimplevibrantlife.com.



Alan Muskat with Chicken of the Woods, the mushroom that has a chicken taste



Morels. Photos courtesy of No Taste Like Home

