Hunting and gathering keeps us connected to the natural world. Yet how many of us still know how to live off the land?

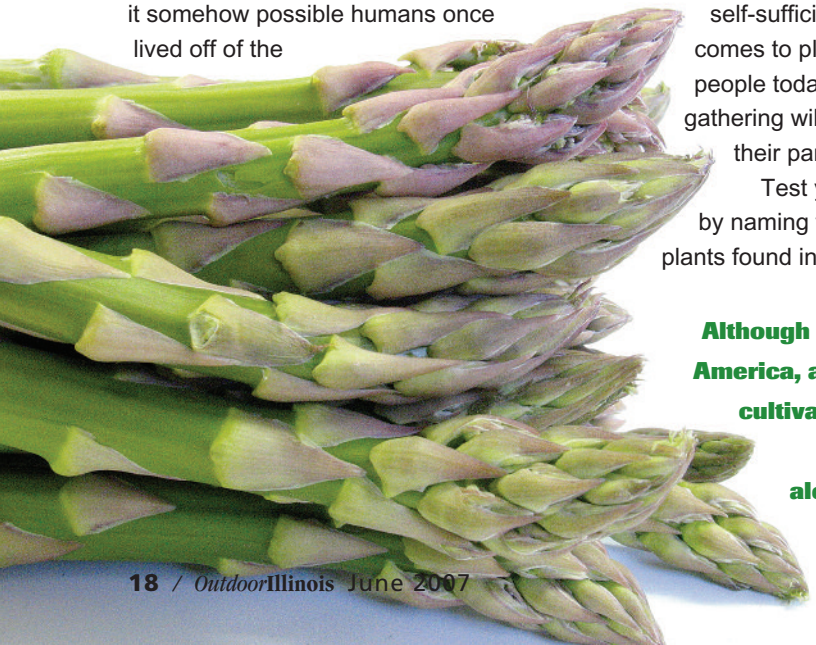
The Gathering Revival

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

To some, it's one of the great mysteries of our modern existence: Before the invention of microwave-ready waffles and carry-out buckets of chicken, where did humans get their food? Even more puzzling: Is it somehow possible humans once lived off of the land, sustaining themselves entirely with readily available plants and animals?

The startling truth is, wild foods have been a fundamental part of human existence for thousands of years in North America. Only recently has our civilized population lost its understanding of how to gather from nature what is perfectly edible, and what's not. While hunting and fishing remain popular links to our self-sufficient heritage, when it comes to plants, relatively few people today are any good at gathering wild, edible plants and their parts.

Test your own knowledge by naming five wild, edible plants found in Illinois.



Although not native to North America, asparagus escaped cultivation years ago and offers a tasty find along fencerows and other sunny spots in Illinois.

OK, berries are easy. Blackberries, strawberries and raspberries are conspicuous, wild favorites and can be found throughout parts of the Prairie State from early to mid summer. Wild plum trees and their rich fruits appear occasionally throughout the forests and thickets of Illinois. Then there are the nuts. Native black walnuts and sweet hickory nuts come to mind.

Collecting wild foods can be a relaxing and therapeutic way to spend time outdoors. A summer hike can become a berry-picking session once eyes are trained to identify edible species.

Many recognize the morel mushroom as a spring delicacy. Yet those garlic mustard leaves also are deliciously edible.

Pecans, a southern staple, are still gathered from wild pecan trees in the southern portion of Illinois.

Everybody recognizes acorns. Unfortunately, this plentiful mast crop requires special treatment to remove bitter tannins before being eaten. (Most people don't care to bother with the repeated boiling and water changes and rinsing required to leach out the tannins in acorns. But acorns from white oak species are less trouble and a good acorn meal can be prepared from white oak acorns without much work.) American chestnuts, while still rare due to the blight which decimated the chestnut forests in eastern North America more than 100 years ago, produce famously delicious nuts both raw and roasted. The good news: Hybrid versions of chestnut trees are scattered around Illinois and feature the chestnut's unmistakably spiny husks—like cactus needles—which make identification easy.

And then there are the greens—dandelion salad, for example, and the famous poke salad, made with boiled young leaves from this large, annual "weed." All are easily identified and found in Illinois.

Still hungry? There's more to eat outdoors, including some edible plants which are wild favorites from long ago.

Humans have been cultivating plants for thousands of years, collecting seeds and introducing new crops wherever they traveled, and, in the process, humans changed the geographical distribution of many plant species, even crossing oceans with favored edible plants.

Asparagus, for example, really isn't a native plant in North America. But those tender shoots from naturalized asparagus plants we find poking up along fence rows and roadsides are always worth stalking in the spring.

Dreaded today as an invasive enemy, the garlicky leaves of the aggressive woodland plant known as garlic mustard are actually quite tasty—it's why Europeans brought the plant to North America. While one must be extremely careful not to accidentally carry away seeds while collecting garlic mustard, a few leaves in

Can't identify edible wild ginger? Or potential look-alikes? Field guides assist hikers identifying everything from wildflowers to butterflies.

a spring salad, or diced and used as an herb, will quickly demonstrate why this exotic plant remains a guilty pleasure.

Unmistakable with their needle-like husks, American chestnuts ripen in early autumn and produce a rich, meaty seed.

"I just love garlic mustard pizza," proclaimed Linda Prescott, site superintendent at Wildlife Prairie State Park near Peoria. "It's now one of our favorite pizzas; it's easy to make and truly has a wonderful flavor."

Adopting the "if you can't beat it, eat it" approach, Prescott and others fight the garlic mustard explosion by consuming some of the plants in creative ways. Look for fresh garlic mustard in the spring among woodland wildflowers, and collect leaves before the white flowers have gone to seed, thereby reducing the risk of carrying loose seeds out of the forest on shoes and clothing. The recipe is a twist on spinach pizzas, but with an herbal, garlic flavor.

Here's a quick recipe:

Garlic Mustard Pizza

Ingredients:

Pre-made pizza crust
Alfredo sauce (any brand will do)
Garlic mustard leaves (use either blanched or raw leaves; blanched leaves can be frozen and stored for year-around use)
Sprinkle of oregano (optional)
Pizza cheese and toppings of your choice

Preparation

Spread the prepared pizza crust with Alfredo sauce. Cover with as many garlic mustard leaves as you desire, then layer the cheese or cheeses of your choice, such as Mozzarella or Provolone. Add your choice of toppings, such as olives, peppers, mushrooms, etc. Bake in a 425-degree oven for 10-12 minutes or until golden brown, serve. This unique and simple pizza a fresh way to utilize and enjoy garlic mustard—the plant you hate to love.

Obtaining wild plants for the kitchen is no trouble for owners of suitable habitat upon which to forage. But collecting on public lands has limits. While some wild edible plant parts—such as nuts and berries—can be collected legally in state parks and other Department of Natural Resources properties, individual site restrictions often apply. Check with site managers before collecting. Only the edible fruiting bodies of plants and fungi (mushrooms) are legal fare at DNR sites.