

Spring Plants for medicine and food

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The common weeds are often the most beneficial. A plant need not be exotic, expensive, or foreign to be effective. Just look under your feet.

This information is best used in combination with a good field guide such as Peterson's Guide to Medicinal Plants. Make certain you know the plant before using. Harvest ethically – with permission, with respect for those who come after, and leave plenty for the plant to flourish as well as those who depend on it (the birds, bees, and wild animals).

Bee Balm also known as Bergamot, Latin name *Monarda*, includes over a dozen varieties. *Monarda fistulosa* is the wild local variety. I've been assured - erroneously it turns out - that this is the plant used in Earl Grey tea that gives it a special flavor. It is not. The Bergamot Oil added to Earl Grey is *Citrus bergamia*, an entirely different plant. Bee Balm is used as a tea, for both medicinal effects and for a pleasant flavor. The benefits include strong antiseptic value, as a stimulant for colds and sore throats (you can use it as a steam for sore throats as well) and gastric benefits for nausea and gas. It can be used externally for infections and when you have simple irritations of the skin that would be helped by a mild and gentle antiseptic. I especially like to use it by the handful in spaghetti sauces, chili, on pizza and other places where I might otherwise have used basil or oregano. Is it my imagination that my chili is less gas producing when bee balm has been added? It seems to help. I gather Bee Balm throughout the spring and summer, using the fresh leaves for the first few months. In August I like to gather enough to last the winter, flowers and all.

Burdock *Arctium lappa* is a biennial with a lovely purple flower that will soon turn into the sticky burr so many find annoying. The burdock root, considered a culinary treasure, is still good to eat in the first year (non-flowering) plants. But if you dug up the root of the second year plants, you'd find a woody and sometimes even hollow tough root that is worthless both as food and medicine. The leaves can be used as a poultice for scrapes and cuts, and are truly amazing when applied to both chemical and burns and mild burns from fire or scalds.

Carrot *Daucus carota* Be certain you smell the carrot smell before using. This plant can look like young poison hemlock. The top leaves of wild carrot can be eaten, and the root used in any way you would use carrot. It is a biennial, so the long narrow taproot is good in the first year and spring of the second year only. The flower (Queen Ann's Lace) is edible and is a beautiful addition to salads, and is especially lovely on cakes.

Catnip *Nepeta cataria* can be used as a natural insect repellent. Made into an oil or a tincture (an alcohol based preparation), it works really well to keep mosquitoes at bay. I tend to need to reapply it every half hour or so, but as a natural method it is very effective. As a last minute help, I have been known to go into the woods with catnip stems and leaves braided into my hair, or hanging from a hat. I just crush it a bit to keep it active. It works surprisingly well. The tea is calming and like all mints can help settle the stomach.

Chicory, *Cichorium intybus*, is commonly mistaken for dandelion until it produces the lovely pale blue flowers. While the leaves can be eaten (chicory has a hairy midrib, dandelion is smooth) the flowers are also edible, and the root can be dug up, roasted in a slow (200 degree) oven for a couple hours, and then ground to use like coffee.

Cleavers (*Gallium aparine*) is named for its ability to stick to clothing or fur. It is harvested when in flower, the tops are tintured. Once tintured, it is helpful for reducing swelling, and mild edema. It can help some people with reducing allergic reactions.

Chickweed (*Stellaria media*) **Chickweed**, *Stellaria media*, is a tiny little plant that is sort of viney in the way it crawls around your yard. The flowers are also small and pretty. The whole plant can be eaten, and is tasty in salads or made into pesto. Used topically, the crushed leaves can help cool wounds, decrease swelling and of special note it seems to help many people with skin problems including eczema and psoriasis.

Clover *Trifolium pratense* This mineral rich plant can be added to salads (use the flowering tops) or dried for infusions. The red clover is especially valued.

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinalis*) A bitter green, the leaves can be used in salads, in stir-fries, as a pot green mixed with other vegetables, or as a garnish on sandwiches - yep, even on your hamburger in place of lettuce. I blend them into homemade salad dressing, in dips, and have even made spanakopita with dandelion greens in place of spinach. It's a delight simply cooked Greek style with olive oil and garlic. Like other bitter greens, dandelions help stimulate digestion when eaten a few minutes before or during a meal. They contain more beta-carotene, which the body converts to vitamin A, than carrots. The leaves are also high in calcium and other minerals, and antioxidants. They contain vitamin C and act as a mild diuretic. The leaves and roots also provide nourishment for the liver. And of course dandelion wine can be made from the flowers, which is also enjoyed as a digestive aid and a pleasant beverage.

All parts of the dandelion are edible at all times of the year. The leaves of most (but not all) varieties are more bitter midsummer and around the time of flowering. They are the most palatable in the spring and fall. The roots are harvested in the spring and fall for their medicinal value and can be preserved in alcohol (I use 100 proof vodka) or in vinegar. The vodka makes a tincture, used a few drops at a time. The vinegar creates a sort of pickle, the root can still be eaten for the flavor but the resulting vinegar is a mineral rich potion enjoyed for its bio-availability. I pick the flowers and shred them into salads (an entire dandelion blossom can be a little overwhelming for most people).

<http://www.annarbor.com/entertainment/food-drink/wildcrafting-the-lowly-dandelion---let-it-live-until-you-eat-it/>

Dog Bane *Apocynum androsaemifolium* is not an edible weed, but considered of great value for the twine that can be made by twisting or braiding the stringy fiber found in its stems.

Garlic Mustard *Alliaria petiolata* This invasive has been in the news, and as it continues to occupy more territory and destroy more native plants more people are learning to identify it. It is a tasty plant, combining the hot of mustard and the spice of garlic. Great in salads, as a cooked green, in pesto, and in many other dishes. Pull it up by the roots, and eat the leaves flowers and stalks. As it gets older it is better cooked than raw, but can be found year round even under the snow.

Ginger *Asarum canadense* is the local wild variety. Like the similar *Zingiber officinale* you can make a decoction (boil the roots for 20 minutes covered) and even turn that into ginger ale or ginger beer by adding other traditional ingredients (sassafras root, burdock root, etc.)

Goldenrod *Solidago canadensis* and *S. odora* are two helpful varieties. The vivid flowering tops can be steeped & enjoyed. The lovely flowers steeped for 20-30 minutes can be soothing for coughs, colds, and some report it has helped pollen allergies. Goldenrod is often being mistaken for the allergies caused by Ragweed. How nice to know goldenrod can help allergies rather than cause them! You can dry the flowering tops and store for later use.

Grape *Vitis* The tendrils are a surprise citrusy tasting addition to salads. The leaves are eaten after being preserved in olive oil, or blanched. Mature leaves contain tannins, cooking or boiling helps remove them. Be sure not to mistake wild grapes for Virginia creeper berries, which are toxic. Virginia creeper has 5 leaves.

Groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*) and Ragwort (*Senecio jacobea*) is a slow acting plant for helping with PMS symptoms including severe cramping. It can take a few months to work, and the dose is low, about 10 drops a day. The flowering tops are used in tincture.

Horsetail *Equisetum arvense* is an ancient plant, and it looks very odd. The early plant is used for bone loss, urinary tract inflammation, and as a diuretic. It can be used as a fresh infusion (steeped a shorter time, 20-30 minutes). Because of the high silica content, it should be used with caution if there are kidney problems, and also not used of extensive periods of time. The silica increases as the plant matures, so only the spring plant should be used. The later plant was bundled to use for "scouring" dishes, hence the common name "scouring rush".

Lamb's quarters, *Chenopodium*, grows in disturbed ground, commonly a flower or vegetable bed. It has a nice rich, mild, slightly chalky taste, is great as a base for salads (I use it in place of lettuce), as a spinach-like topping for sandwiches or can also be lightly steamed. If you blanch it (a few seconds in boiling water) it can be frozen for adding to soups, casseroles, or other dishes all winter long. It's almost certain that if you are removing this from your vegetable beds to

plant something else, the lamb's quarters is likely more nutritious and easier to grow than whatever you are planting.

Mallows (*Malva neglecta*, *M. parviflora*, *M. sylvestres*) The fruit, leaves, and roots of the mallow are soothing both inside and out. The little "cheeses" which are the fruit formed after flowering are a fun addition to a salad. The green plant on the left is the mallow, the photo directly below that is a few of the fruits harvested and held in my hand. Use as is. The texture is solid, and the inside pleasantly slippery. Which is a better word to use than slimy... The starch extracted by soaking or making an herbal vinegar is soothing to the entire digestive tract and can be taken internally. Topically, it helps with bites burns and sprains.

Mint *Mentha* is everywhere and there are so many different kinds. Some start off tame, some appear wild. *Mentha piperita* is chocolate mint, one of my favorites. *Nepeta cataria* is common catnip. These can all be used as teas or to cook with. Catnip and other mints are known for soothing the stomach; I used peppermint for post-surgical nausea recently. It was amazing. I brought some essential oil of peppermint to the hospital with me, and in the recovery room had a friend place a few drops on a piece of gauze. Every time I felt a little nausea come on I took a sniff and immediately felt better.

Jewelweed *Impatiens capensis*, Jewelweed is best known as an antidote and treatment for poison ivy. Applied just after exposure it can prevent the skin reaction from the poison ivy's urushiol. If you do have an outbreak of poison ivy, the juice from the stems and leaves will ease the irritation, and in my experience will also make the rash heal more quickly. Jewelweed juice also eases bee stings, wasp stings, mosquito bites, and minor skin irritations. Just by rubbing the plant between your fingers or against your skin you'll get a lot of juice. You can put it in the blender with a small amount of water or use a juicer. The juice can't be saved by freezing - it does mold easily - but can be added to salves or even homemade soap.

The plant is edible, but high in selenium, so only the early spring shoots are eaten and then only with at least one change of water which is then discarded. I did eat some many years ago, and I didn't find it appealing. I've had friends make and drink a mild infusion (leaves and stems steeped 20 minutes in a closed container) as another way to prevent poison ivy. Anecdotal information says this can help.

This is one of the only plants that also explodes. The seeds are edible, but to harvest these edible seeds you have to capture them in your hand as the seed pod explodes. That's unique! Most wild foods don't exploding and will stay still so you can pick them or dig them up. Not jewelweed. <http://www.annarbor.com/entertainment/food-drink/capturing-wild-food--a-fun-and-silly-plant-to-play-with/>

Milkweed *Asclepias syriaca*. The stalk is a thick succulent looking shoot, with the leaves starting off tight to the stem. A definitive identification is the milky white sap that bleeds from a broken or cut leaf or stem. Later, these plants are easily spotted with the ball of light purple fragrant flower clusters, and then the pods bursting with seeds that fly away to spread. Once introduced to your garden, this plant spreads widely and easily so you will soon have plenty. First off, consider leaving it to grow. The monarch butterfly relies on milkweed for survival, laying eggs on the plant that will eventually hatch.

Milkweed, as well as dogbane, has also been used for making natural cord or rope, after the butterflies are done with it. I have a couple of friends who gather and twist the fibers from the stalk with very sturdy and beautiful results.

If you really don't want this plant around or can find an area where they are crowded, the stalk is edible. The buds are also edible, and the very early pods. Almost like asparagus, you can just snap off the stalk if it is shorter than six to eight inches (a hand span) and then cook it in a few changes of water. Now I've recently been told that it can be eaten just lightly steamed, but I'm going to direct you to use the change of water method just to be extra safe. The milky sap in milkweed contains toxic glycosides that are removed with water. To be safe, boil the shoots in a bit of water for two to three minutes, rinse, add new boiling water and boil another two to three minutes, rinse again, more new boiling water, boil again for two to three minutes, and then rinse and eat. The shoot will turn a very pretty bright green.

The new milk weed shoots taste fresh, a little like broccoli, and I think they have a light asparagus-like taste as well. A few cautions: once the shoots are over six to eight inches, do not eat them. This is also true once the leaves begin to pull away from the stem. Some people may have localized dermatological reactions (irritation) from the milky sap: avoid contact with it. http://www.wildflowers-and-weeds.com/The_Forager/milkweed.htm

Mullein *Verbascum Thapsus* is a biennial known for its tall flowering stalk in the second year of growth. The stalk has small yellow flowers that can be used in olive oil as an ointment for earaches. The soft hairy leaves support the lungs and colon. It was often smoked, but is probably better used in an infusion. The leaves are easily dried for later use.

Nettle *Urtica dioica*, does sting. There are tiny hairs located along the stem and the underside of the leaves that can inject a tiny bit of formic acid into your skin. It only happens when you brush against the hairs, but the result ranges from a mild tingly sensation to an itching rash that can last hours.

With so much invested in defense, you should suspect that there is something wonderful to protect. There is. Stinging nettle is a plant rich in nutrition and medicinal value.

In 1989 Susun Weed, the herbalist I apprenticed with, devoted an entire chapter of her book "Healing Wise" to nettles. Since that time, studies using *Urtica* have affirmed its traditional use for kidney and urinary support, asthma relief, and help with benign prostatic hypertrophy (BPH). It is also an excellent burn remedy when used topically in a salve or oil.

As a nourishing food, nettle is a significant source of protein, calcium and iron. That is why midwives and pregnant women prize it. It contains the nutrients needed during pregnancy. The nourishing benefits are of course best delivered by eating the nettles. Once they are steamed for 10-15 minutes they give up their defense and can no longer sting. The same is true when dried. Steamed nettles are great on their own or can be added to recipes wherever greens and especially spinach would be used. But the flavor is so lovely, rich, satisfying and whole, I would advise keeping it simple and just enjoying the plant as is.

Nettles grow where there are high levels of nitrogen in the soil as well as rich moist environments. So look for them around old barns, by a river or a lake. Harvest until they are about two feet tall. The top 1/3 of the plant can be used.

Plantain, *Plantago major* with wide leaves, or narrow leaf plantain *Plantago lanceolata* grows near paths, driveways and especially in areas between the sidewalk and the street. Low to the ground, in a rosette, it is there when you need it. Not only is it a salad green, it is an excellent first aid ally. Crushed or chewed you can use it on insect bites, rashes, scrapes and especially on cold sores and a sore throat. It can help with mild pain relief and is soothing and healing.

Because the taste is mild, it's ideal for mouth sores because you can just place some of the chewed up leaf against the injury and leave it there. I've also used it for throat pain associated with radiation and chemotherapy, either chewed or juiced and made into ice cubes. Made into an oil or salve, it can be used externally year round.

Purslane, *Portulaca olearacea*, is so common I've found it growing next to many of the parking meters downtown. Given how popular these areas are with dogs, I wouldn't suggest harvesting from that area, but I have taken home a few pieces to plant in my garden for later eating. Many people are unaware that this common garden weed is one of the richest sources of omega 3 precursors in the plant kingdom. It has a benign taste, and the fat, succulent-like leaves are easy to add to salads or as a garnish to other foods. Not available in stores, it is enjoyed in season fresh from the garden as long as it is actively growing. One hundred grams of fresh purslane leaves (one serving) contain about 300-400 mg of 18:3w3; 12.2 mg of alpha-tocopherol; 26.6 mg of ascorbic acid; 1.9 mg of beta-carotene; and 14.8 mg of glutathione. Yes, this simple weed is packed with nutritional benefits.

St. John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) is now well known for its help with Seasonal Affective Disorder and mild depression, but it has many other uses. The flowering tops are used for tincture, or made into an oil for external use. The oil can help with nerve pain and regeneration, protect against radiation burns, and sooth aching muscles strains and bruises. The plant is anti viral and perfect for cold sores and shingles, both topically and internally. Internal use can interfere with the liver processing some drugs, and in rare cases sun sensitivity may develop, although its normal action is as a sunscreen.

Self heal (*Prunella vulgaris*) is a mint high in antioxidants, minerals, calcium, and other nutrients. You can gain that value by eating it in salad or as a pot green, or making a vinegar. The leaves and flowers are used.

Shepherds's purse (*Capsella bursa pastoris*) has tiny heart shaped fruits, once they appear the top part of the plant is tinctured and is used to stop bleeding and menstrual flooding.

Slippery Elm *Ulmus fulva* is an amazing plant for its ability to soothe ulcerative colitis, Crohn's disease, and to restore appetite for people in late stages of AIDS or cancer. The bark is harvested in strips, then powdered and eaten or used in cooking. It can also be useful for constipation or irritated bowel, and hemorrhoids.

Willow *Salix* bark is used for headaches, as an anti-inflammatory, for joint pain, and other aches and soreness. The bark contains salicylic acid, as does aspirin.

Witch Hazel *Hamamelis* bark is tinctured to make an astringent tincture useful for wound healing, hemorrhoids, and swollen and bruised skin. The plant grows in clumps and is unusual in that it flowers in the late fall, but produces its fruit before the flower.

Violet *Viola*, has edible leaves and flowers, is a pretty plant in the early spring, and the leaves are used in herbal medicine for reducing some types of tumors.

Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) The white flowering yarrow is used medicinally. The flowering tops can be tinctured to prevent colds and flu, but the tincture can also be used externally to repel ticks, mosquitoes, and sand flies. It has to be reapplied often, about every half hour. Yarrow is anti-bacterial, can stop bleeding when applied externally, but taken internally has a relaxing effect on the veins and so can also promote bleeding. It is a great pain reliever when applied topically, you can use the leaves or flowering tops as a poultice.

Yellow Dock, *Rumex crispus*, remains one of my all-time favorites. The leaves come up early in the spring and I can make pesto from the long curly leaves in April and sometimes earlier. They are great in salads, or cooked with other greens. I've made an herbal oil from the root that has helped remarkably with tissue healing, especially with trauma. It hastens healing, decreases pain and minimizes bruising. There are no studies or reports on the herb used this way, but it has a growing following based on anecdotal experience. The leaves are high in iron content, the root is tinctured and used to increase iron absorption in addition to many other uses.

Revised May 2010

Parts of this handout were based on a handout from Susun S. Weed, Spring Weed Walk

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