

# Wild Edible Plants

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## Violets (*Viola papilionacea*)

The fragile beauty of the violet has long been noted by man. In Greek mythology, the goddess Io's tears became the violets of tender green woodlands. Ancient Romans used the plant for declarations of love, the treatment of heart ailments, a skin softener and almost everything else between. According to more recent folklore, give someone a bouquet of these tiny beauties and

thoughts of love turn to the sender.

There are over fifty species of violets in this part of the United States. The blue violet of our meadows and woodlands is one of the most common and can therefore be gathered. Although the violets are spring bloomers, they often produce flowers again in late summer. Interestingly, many of these buds never open but fertilize themselves internally and produce seeds. The violet, like another common species jewelweed, has a unique method of seed dispersal. As the capsule dries, it compresses the seeds which are shot out as much as four to five feet!

The fresh young leaves have long been used raw in salads or cooked as greens. They are high in both vitamins A and C: a welcome addition to our ancestor's winter diet of dried and preserved foods. In fact, both the leaves and flowers have three times the amount of vitamin C as does an orange.

The delightful blue flower can be used as a colorful garnish for any type of confection. For a pretty candy, dip the flowers in boiled and cooled sugar water and allow to harden on waxed paper. The flowers also produce a tasty jelly and syrup.



## Dandelion (*Taraxacum*)

This native European, imported for the kitchen garden, is cursed by lawn owners but admired by the open-minded. What other flower brings such gay sunny color so early in the season? If the yard is plagued by their presence, look upon them as lovely wildflowers rather than common weeds. Dandelions are very good for you with high concentrations of vitamins A and C.

The leaf shape lends the common name, distorted from French where it means "teeth of the lion." The number of teeth is a barometer for

the amount of sunshine the plant receives: the more teeth, the more sun. The deep taproot of the plant makes it difficult to remove but yields a good coffee when dried and ground. The spectacular yellow flowers open and close every day; possibly remaining closed on overcast days. When the flower closes permanently, continuing the process of seed production, the stem elongates overnight, much to the chagrin of lawn mowers. This aids the plant in seed dispersal.

The plant is best known today as a source of material for greens. Select tender young leaves (the older ones are bitter) in an area free of contaminants. To prolong the harvest, a bucket may be placed over the plant resulting in tender, paler leaves. The autumn frost renews leaf growth for some fine additional pickings.

These greens are good cooked, raw in salads or wilted. The flowers are also used in the production of a mellow wine.

## A Word to the Wise

Welcome to the world of plants. Your exploration into this field will be rewarded by a wealth of rich experiences, a rediscovered sense of beauty, and hours of relaxation trekking the fields and forests of Ohio.

The art of foraging for food is as old as mankind. What is a hobby to its was a necessity for all people of historical hunter/gatherer societies. Before the advent of agriculture and domesticated plants, food gathered from the forest was a sole means of survival. Since wild plants could not tolerate the stress of today's population, it is fortunate that mass production is now a reality. Of course, our crops are merely genetically modified descendants of wild plants.

If you are interested in wild edible plants, but not wild plants, alas, you are in for certain disappointment. A skill in the first cannot be gained without a love for the second. Unless you have a very patient friend who is a plant expert, it is simply not possible to learn just the edible plants without learning many of those which are not.

The necessity of obtaining a good plant field guide cannot be over stressed. Although a wild foods book can illustrate the plant, it fails to identify confusing look-a-likes that may or may not be edible.

Use wisdom in choosing your collection areas -- **do not collect in parks or other refuges!** Remember, hunting plants is no different than hunting wild game. **Permission from the landowner is required.** Never collect rare or fragile species no matter how they might delight the palate. Never collect in areas where pollution is a problem especially if you are seeking aquatic species.

Extreme caution is urged for beginners venturing into the search for wild edibles. Be positive of your identification and sample only tiny portions at first. Some individuals may exhibit no reaction to a specific species while it can prove toxic to others,

You will note the obvious mission of mushrooms from this publication. Although several species of the sponge mushroom or morel (*Morchellaceae*) are readily identifiable, many other mushrooms are easily confused. Some inedible species create indigestion; Others can kill the chief. Therefore, the mushrooms are not included. Be an expert before you venture into the fungi.



### Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*)

The old witch of the woods reportedly lives in the elderberry shrub. Conversely, folklore also teaches that a branch of elderberry hung over the front door keeps witches away from the homestead. Perhaps, the branches merely signified that a crone already lived there!

The three- to thirteen-foot shrub has long been noted for its qualities. The stems have a large pithy center which is easily removed. Children recognized its value as a bean shooter while their forefathers saw in this the perfect maple sap spile. The pith was punched out and the ten-to twelve-inch segment was driven into a pre-drilled hole in the sugar tree in mid-February. This deflected the flow of sap from up the tree to a bucket or hollowed log.

The sap with its average 2% sugar content was then boiled down to syrup or sugar producing one of the few sweeteners native to Ohio. (The honey bee and its sweet nectar were introduced in the United States in the late 1600s.)

Creamy white clusters of flowers grace the shrub in June and July. These heads are a treat when dipped in egg batter and fried. Add a touch of the maple syrup produced last spring with an elderberry spile! The fruits ripen in later summer and are popular in pie and jelly. In cooking with elderberries, always add a touch of lemon juice or other tart seasoning to highlight the unusual elderberry flavor.



### Blackberry (*Rubus allegheniensis*) Black Raspberry (*Rubus occidentalis*)

Of all edible plants, the berries are probably recognized and enjoyed by more amateur collectors than any other. Although some botanists identify over 200 species in the genera, the blackberry and black raspberry are among those most commonly eaten. In addition, these shrubs provide excellent erosion control, wildlife food and serve as a pioneer species in old fields.

The black raspberry typically flowers prior to the blackberry. Fragrant blossoms produced in May develop into berries in June. Unripe fruit are bright red and hard. The round, six-foot cane is a reddish purple partially covered by a white bloom or powder. This powder is thought to be a natural pesticide. The leaves are sometimes used in the making of a fine tea or flavoring to disguise the taste of medicinal beverages.

The heat of summer lies upon the land when the blackberry ripens. Cool dewy mornings of picking stretch into afternoon hours in the kitchen with the rewarding aroma of cooking jam emanating from the stovetop. Canning blackberry jam is like preserving a bit of summer for bitter winter mornings.

The blackberry bramble is sometimes confused with the invasive multiflora rose. Differentiating the canes of the two is easy as the rose is round in cross-section while the blackberry has edges. Flowers are produced on the tenfoot canes in May and June while the fruit ripens in late July and August.

Jams, jellies, cobbler, and pie are the favorite uses for these berries. They also freeze well, providing treats throughout the year.

### Shagbark Hickory (*Carya ovata*)

This tree of the deciduous forest reaches heights of 80 to 100 feet. It is one of the most recognizable species even in winter with its long peeling strips of light gray bark. It has been suggested the bark texture might be an adaptation to keep squirrels away from the developing nuts.

The hickory's wood is tough, strong and elastic. It has seen many uses including the manufacture of tool handles, baskets and especially barrel hoops. It also produces a very hot fire and thus has been valued as a heating fuel. The crushed, green husks of the nuts were once used to poison fish. This collection method is now illegal in most areas.

The edible nuts of the shagbark and a few other hickories are a real delight in the fall. As the mast falls in late September and October, man must compete with many animals to reap the bounty. The native Americans ground the nuts for flour and used the meats in many dishes. Hickory is an Indian name derived from the word Pawcohiccora which was a milky drink



This booklet serves as only an introduction to the vast subject of "wild foods." The Division of Parks and Recreation hopes it will whet your appetite and entice you into a discovery of the magical world of plants.

made from finely powdered hickory nuts. Autumn would not be complete without a trip to the woodland on a warm afternoon to collect nuts.



### Persimmon (*Persimmon diospyros*)

Many plants listed in old-time pharmacopeias were species originally utilized by the Indians in the treatment of various ailments. Such was the case with the persimmon tree. Frontiersmen and settlers copied their use of an extract as an astringent.

Most folks today recognize the persimmon not as a medicinal but as a fine edible. There is no way to describe the mellow, slightly pungent taste of the ripe fruit. Used in cakes, pies and especially pudding, the ripeness is judged by a soft interior and orange, wrinkled and mottled skin. Beware: friends persuade many the unwary into sampling the unripe fruit. The concentration of tannin will initiate pursed lips which will not dissipate for awhile!

The persimmon is most common in the unglaciated southern and southeastern sections of the state. It grows 25 to 40 feet in height and wildlife, like humans, seek the tastiness of its fruit. The dark hardwood was used for the making of small items such as pipe bowls and household accessories.

### Paw paw (*Asimina triloba*)



"Pickin' up pawpaws in the pawpaw patch!" Almost every child has heard and sung this old song but how many folks have sampled the delicacy to realize the significance of going down to the pawpaw patch? These "Appalachian bananas" are a real treat when you can beat the critters to them.

A six- to twenty-foot understory tree, this is the northern most resident of the tropical custardapple family. Its dull red blossoms appear in May and have an odor unusual in the flower world. The inquisitive are not greeted by sweet fragrance but rather by the distinctive odor of rotting meat. Little wonder they are pollinated by flies.

Barring a late spring frost, the fruit produced are delectable. Their soft texture when ripe is reminiscent of bananas, but sweeter. They can be eaten raw or used in a wide variety of confections including puddings and pies. They are difficult to see amongst the large leaves. Do not allow the mottled, partially blackened skin after frost deter you - they are at their best when dead ripe.

The pawpaw prefers moist soils and can often be found in river valleys and near springs. A green fruit observed in summer is often gone before it ripens as it is a preferred food of squirrel, raccoon, fox and opossum. The seeds, often found in the scat, are large and pretty when polished, and were once used as necklace ornaments.

### Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*)

March brings the rise of sweet sap in the sugar tree and the yellow haze of the spicebush bloom in rich Ohio woodlands. The promise has been there beneath the blanketing snows, lingering in the buds and protected in deep roots. The longer days near the vernal equinox coax the buds to swell and entice folks back to the woodlot.

Although each individual flower of the spicebush is inconspicuous, their multitude lends a special hue to the spring forest. Blooming long before the elliptical leaves appear, the tree thrives in the understory of rich beech-maple forests. It rarely attains a height over ten to twelve feet.



Many plant species are regarded as indicators of the soil and rock conditions beneath their foliage.

The red cedar denotes limestone bedrock while the black willow grows in moist areas. The spicebush was regarded as evidence of fertile, loamy soils. Early land surveyors looked for the presence of this small tree when making their evaluations.

The yellow flowers produce a small bright red fruit from July through September. The berries and twigs are favored by many forms of wildlife including birds and deer.

Early settlers utilized the berries as a spice. Dried and ground, they add flavor to all manner of confections and stews.

The most popular use is of the leaves and twigs to produce a fine tea. Steep the crushed material to desired strength and add honey or sugar as a sweetener.

### Day Lily (*Hemerocallis fulva*)

The scientific name of this prolific plant means "beautiful for a day" which suits the plant well. As many as twelve flowers grace each stalk, blooming one at a time for a day only. Unlike the true native lilies, the flower stalk is leafless.

In the far east, the day lily has been grown for thousands of years as a food crop. It has escaped from gardens around the world and is now firmly rooted in ditches across this country.

Few garden escapees are so useful as the hardy day lily. In spring, the lower portion of the long strap-like leaves can be eaten as a green. Later, the flower buds may be boiled and seasoned as a vegetable. The flowers themselves may be used as a soup thickener.

Perhaps the most delicious part of this plant are the starchy root tubers or swellings which number as many as thirty per plant. Their taste is reminiscent of potatoes although crisper and sweeter. They may be boiled, fried with onions or added raw to the salad. Although they may be harvested at any time, they are best in autumn after a frost.



### Jerusalem Artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*)

The sunny contenance of a field of sunflowers reflects the warmth of a summer sky. Although over sixty species are native to the Americas, the Jerusalem artichoke is one of the best known. The small, starchy tubers on the roots were a staple relished by the American Indian as well as today's naturalists.

These growths can be eaten raw, added to salads, or cooked in any manner one would prepare potatoes. Their crisp sweetness improves after the first frost. Beware of planting this native sunflower in a cultivated garden. Their inbred hardiness for Ohio's conditions will soon result in too much competition for delicate vegetable crops.

The huge heads of our commercial sunflowers were developed from the breeding of native species of the Midwest. This cultivation started with the Plains Indians who recognized its value as a food plant.

### Common Cattail (*Typha latifolia*)

The call of a red-winged blackbird from the cattail marsh is for many a first sign of spring. The males arrive initially to establish a breeding territory, for most of the state in late February or early March. They join the muskrat in frequenting this useful plant. The little fur-bearing rodent uses the leaves for his den and eats the underwater rhizomes.

The Indian was the first to join the wild creatures in dining upon the cattail. During the harsh winter months, the rhizomes may be ground and used for flour. Spring brings the tender young shoots used as fresh greens, replete with vitamins and minerals. The young green female flowers (which will become the brown cattail) are

a treat when boiled, buttered and served like corn on the cob. The mature pollen of the male flower, sitting atop the female part, was an additive to flour. Finally, the summer rhizomes may be peeled and boiled or fried with onions. Only the mature leaves would seem unusable for the chef, but alas, he may weave them for a colorful, durable placemat!

The structure of these leaves is remarkable. Peel away the outer green layer to reveal a complex inner matrix of fiber, stiffening the long blade in the wildest summer thunderstorm.



### Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*)

Aptly named, the velvety twigs and limbs do resemble a buck's antlers before the rut. Folks often are wary of this tree since there exists a single poisonous species of sumac. This poison sumac is an inhabitant solely of bogs and acidic wetlands. It is rare in Ohio and unlikely to be encountered. In contrast with the red berries of the non-poisonous species, it has white berries reminiscent of poison ivy.

The bark and leaves of the sumac are rich in tannic acid which was





historically used in the tanning or curing of leather. An old familiar name for the small tree was "shoemaker,"referring to its popular usage among shoemakers.

The Ohio Indian used the leaves of sumac as a component of kinnikinnik -- their commonly smoked tobacco. The pioneers used the berries for a tea to relieve throat irritations (probably induced by tobacco).

A popular use today is in the making of "Indian pink lemonade."The fine hairs covering the red berries are replete with malic acid usage among which is also found in grapes.

### Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*)

The smell of sassafras tea brewing calls forth a vision of hazy blue hills, log cabins and the call of spring peepers on a mild March night. Once known as the spring tonic of Appalachia, folks now enjoy it year-round and nationwide.

The sassafras seedling is one of the first to invade disturbed areas. The summer foliage is easily recognizable with its four different leaf shapes: oblong, right-handed mitten, left-handed mitten, and mitten with two thumbs. The bark on older trees, which can attain a height of 65 feet, has a distinctive reddish hue. The wood is coarse and durable and is used for items such as posts, barrels and lumber.

The essential oils of the sassafras have been utilized to impart odor to soaps and medicinal aids. The blue fruits which are produced August through October are favored by wildlife.

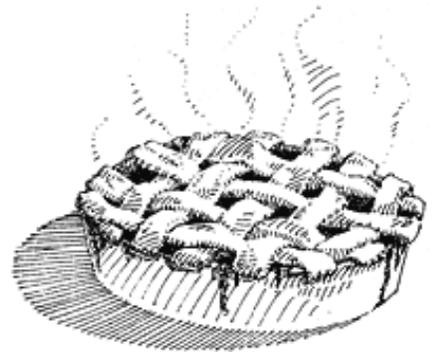


Sit back in the rocker, prop up your feet on the porch rail and daydream of lonely valleys and mist-shrouded hills as you enjoy a cup of sassafras tea.

## RECIPES

### Berry Pie

- 1 double crust pie shell (see below)
- 5 cups fresh berries
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 1/4 cup flour
- 1/2 tsp. cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp. lemon peel
- 1/2 tsp. nutmeg
- 1 tbsp. butter



Prepare pie crust. Place bottom crust in 9-inch pie pan. Sprinkle with flour. Combine remaining ingredients except butter. Spread in pie shell. Dot with butter. Add top crust. Crimp. Puncture steam holes. Sprinkle with sugar. Cover crimped edges with foil to prevent excessive browning. Bake at 425 degrees for 50 minutes.

### Pie Crust

- 3 cups flour
- 1 cup shortening
- 1 egg slightly beaten
- 1 tbsp. vinegar
- 5 tbsp. water

Cut shortening into flour until mixture resembles meal. Mix egg, water and vinegar. Add enough to flour to make soft dough. Roll.

### Elderberry-Sumac Jelly

- 3 cups elderberry juice
- 3 cups unsweetened, strong sumac tea
- 2 pkgs. jelling agent
- 6 cups sugar



To obtain juice, cover elderberries with water. Bring to a boil, mash and simmer for 10 minutes. Strain. Combine juice and sumac tea (see tea recipe). Add jelling agent and bring to full rolling boil. Add sugar and boil for another 2-3 minutes. Pour into glasses and seal.

## Hickory Nut Cake

1 1/2 cup flour  
1 cup chopped nuts  
1 cup brown sugar  
1/2 cup milk  
4 egg whites (beaten until stiff)  
1/2 cup butter  
1/2 tsp. baking soda  
1 tsp. cream of tartar

Cream sugar and butter adding milk and then flour. Add nuts and egg whites (beaten until stiff). Beat entire mixture until smooth. Dissolve cream of tartar and baking soda in one teaspoon of water. Add them to mixture and beat once more. Pour into greased and floured cake pan (medium size). Bake at 350 degrees for 40 minutes.

## Persimmon Pudding

2 cups persimmon pulp  
3 eggs  
1 3/4 cups milk  
2 cups flour  
1/2 tsp. baking soda  
1 tsp. salt  
1/2 tsp. cinnamon  
1/2 tsp. nutmeg  
1 1/2 cups sugar  
3 tbsp. melted butter

Mix pulp, beaten eggs and milk. Sift dry ingredients together. Add pulp, egg and milk mixture. Stir in melted butter and pour into shallow greased pan to a depth of about two inches. Place in pan of water and bake for one hour at 300 degrees. When cold, cut into squares and serve with whipped cream.

## Pawpaw Nut Pudding



1/2 cup brown sugar  
2 envelopes unflavored gelatin  
1/2 tsp. salt  
2/3 cup water  
1/3 cup vanilla pudding mix  
3 eggs separated  
1 cup pawpaw pulp  
1/4 cup sugar  
1 cup chopped nuts

Combine brown sugar, gelatin and salt. Stir in water, pudding mix, slightly beaten egg yolks and pulp. Bring mixture to a boil and then chill until it mounds slightly when spooned. Beat egg whites to soft peaks, gradually add white sugar. Beat until stiff and fold into pawpaw mixture with nuts. Chill until firm.

## Spicebush Tea

The berries, twigs or leaves can be used to make tea. Crush and steep in water to desired strength. Sweeten to taste. May be served iced or hot. Honey makes a good sweetener for the hot tea.

## Sumac Tea (Indian Lemonade)

4-5 berry clusters \*  
1 gallon cold water  
sugar to taste

Place berry clusters in cheesecloth. Swirl in water for several minutes. Remove cheesecloth and berries. Sweeten to taste and add ice. Note: The flavor is all on the outside of the berries. Therefore, any prior washing will remove all the taste! Examine for bugs but DO NOT WASH.

## Wiltd Greens

Dandelion, young cattail, or young violet leaves (amount roughly equal to a head of lettuce)

6 bacon slices  
1 medium onion (thinly sliced)  
2 hard boiled eggs (sliced)  
1/4 cup vinegar  
1 1/2 tsp. sugar  
1/2 tsp. dried mustard  
1/4 tsp. salt  
pepper

Fry bacon until crisp. Remove and discard all but 1/4 cup of the drippings. Crumble bacon on greens. Top with sliced onion and egg. Add remaining ingredients to drippings and bring to a boil. Pour over greens and serve immediately.

### Sassafras Tea



2-3 large (1 inch diameter) roots  
or  
7-8 twig size roots  
water  
sugar to taste

Peel the larger roots, discarding all but the bark. (Smaller roots may be used entire.) Remove dirt. Steep (never boil) to desired strength. Prolonged heat or boiling will produce a bitter taste. Sweeten to taste. May be served hot or iced.