



Safe Foraging Practice

Whilst plants have so many gifts to offer and there can be many health and connection benefits to foraging, you must be aware of the hazards. As many of us have grown up without being shown about wild foods, it is crucial to learn the risks before foraging.

Primer

The gifts and qualities of plants literally go beyond our understanding of them. We are learning more and more about the world of plants through science each year. When arriving in a new environment, I like to ask someone who works in nature what any of the hazards in this locality might be - insects, poisonous plants, predator animals etc. so I know what to look out for to stay safe. This important principle applies to the world of plants. Even when we may feel familiar with a location, it's amazing how much more I always feel there is to learn.

Points to Remember

- *Clear Identification and Poisonous Look Alikes* - It is absolutely crucial to be 100% positive of identification of a plant before considering using it. Photographs and illustrations can vary enormously as can plant specimens themselves which is why it is so important to cross reference. It is really important to learn all the deadly plants in your area. It is also vital to pro-actively learn poisonous lookalikes of particular species you intend to forage. If you are unsure, take a sample of the plant to look up in a good identification book later for future reference. This is better than taking photos because there may be textural details and closer observation needed for a definite ID. Photos can be helpful in addition for showing the context and ecology.
- *Hazards of Heavy Metals* - Do not gather plants for food or medicine from road sides, even farm tracks where machinery operates, due to the tendency for plants to be contaminated by heavy metals when exposed to them in vehicle emissions.
- *Contaminated Water* - Just as there are risks to one's health from drinking non potable water, these same risks apply to ingesting plants growing in or near such water. Plants are filterers of water. Thus, any pollutants in water will be traceable in the plants of that place.
- *Pesticides and Herbicides* - Find out if the site you are using has used pesticides or herbicides. Sometimes they are used where you wouldn't suspect, so it is always worth asking. Ingestion of such chemicals can cause severe illness. Unfortunately many school grounds still use herbicides on their sites.
- *Potency of Wild Foods* - Wild foods are more rich in nutrients and minerals than cultivated, shop-bought foods. It is best to try a little first and see how your body

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feels before eating too much of a wild food you're trying for the first time. There are enormous benefits to supplementing your diet with wild food for the same reason.

- *Connection through Foraging* - It is wonderful for people to deepen connection to the land through the plants and to know certain places as the elder grove, or the cleavers fence where you've foraged in prior years. It is also great to visit the same species during seasons when you cannot harvest them to see what they look like at other stages of their growth cycle.

Recommended Reference Books for Plant Identification

We recommend checking at least two sources when identifying a plant

- Wild Flowers of the British Isles by Garrard and Streeter
- Plants of the British Isles by Barbara Nicholson
- Wild Flowers of Britain by Roger Phillips
- Trees in Britain Europe and North America by Roger Phillips
- Mushrooms by Roger Phillips
- Wild Food by Ray Mears and Gordon Hillman
- Hedgerow Medicine by Julie Bruton-Seal and Matthew Seal
- Wayside Medicine by Julie Bruton-Seal and Matthew Seal

Teacher Tricks and Tips

- There is an invaluable learning and development of relationships through interacting with the same piece of land over at least one whole year. To fully understand and identify a plant you need to observe it through all phases of its life-cycle. For example, can you identify the plant when in buds and shoots, flower, seed, winter form? This awareness is the deepening of connection to plants and connection to place. Most guidebooks show a plant in its flowering form; this is limiting as an identification resource as you may be foraging for the spring shoots or the seeds and nuts.
- Plants belong to tribes and families (just as we do). Learning about the patterns of the different plant families is an exciting learning journey (rather like learning secret codes) which develops the skill of pattern identification making practical ID much faster.
- When foraging in a group, request participants show you what they've picked before adding it to the foraging basket (or eating it). Adults are just as likely to misidentify plants as children.
- Go a layer deeper in your connection to place by finding out if any spray is used as herbicides or pesticides.
- You can get water tested for contamination if you're wanting to forage edible or medicinal plants from lakes etc.

Invisible Learning

- Developing naturalist knowledge
- Developing skills of close observation
- Developing survival skills
- Deepening sense of belonging
- Beginning to understand the hazards of pollutants in our ecosystems

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Risk Assessment Considerations

These are the risk assessment consideration documents to be referred to for this activity.

- Plant Based Activities
- Water Based Activities
- Site risk assessment (specific to your site)

Links

- Respectful Harvest - Foraging Considerations part 1
- Foraging, Wild Food

Tags

- Foraging, Wild Food, Safety, Risks, Hazards
- Tending the Wild
- Caretaking