



*Rebecca Lerner forages for food on Portland's sidewalks. Lerner spent a week eating nothing but what she could gather from the urban environment.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF REBECCA LERNER

## The bounty at our feet

*One woman's experience eating nothing but food found in Portland's urban landscape*

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To read more about Rebecca's experiment and her approach to food, go to her blog at [www.rebeccalearnerwilderness.wordpress.com](http://www.rebeccalearnerwilderness.wordpress.com), or go to [www.culturechange.org](http://www.culturechange.org)

For five days at the end of May, I survived exclusively on wild food if found in Portland. There was no Dumpster diving and nothing plucked from gardens. Instead, I ate weeds and wild plants found within the city limits. I wanted to see what it would be like to survive without supermarkets or even gardens. I knew I could rely on the free, nutritious food that grows all around us, so I foraged the food growing at vacant lots, wilderness areas, yards and sidewalks.

I knew it had been done before. People have been living in what is now Portland for the past 10,000 years and only since the 1850s has anyone been farming or gardening. Before that, the population was surviving on wild food alone. We have pavement now instead of wide open spaces, and we have many more people per capita than ever before, but our ancient plant friends are still here. They are the hearty weeds growing in alleyways and along sidewalks, so strong that they can make it in the city despite all the asphalt and concrete.

In most cases, they have more nutrients than gardened food because they have to be stronger to survive; they're harder than the plants we make it easy for. Many also have medicinal properties. Unfortunately, sometimes they also take in the toxins of the environment they grow in, so use discretion when eating things that grow in places that are not parks.

During the five-day project, I lived on broth I made from boiling stinging nettles, the baked roots of burdock, thistle and wild carrot, raw salads of purslane, miner's lettuce, chickweed, dandelion and red clover, and teas made of rose petals, pine needles, wild chamomile, lemon balm,

cleavers and wild ginger.

I wanted to last for a whole week, but I could not find enough calories to keep me from getting weak. As it turns out, nature is not like the grocery store. Every few weeks, new kinds of plants arrive and other ones disappear.

I learned that just because I saw an edible plant growing somewhere in the beginning of May did not mean that it would still be around when I did the project at the end of May. I found myself stuck in the cusp between when the mushrooms disappeared and before the berries arrived, which meant my food options were very limited. I did not want to eat animals, but if I had, I could have tried to hunt pigeons or fish from local waterways. The native people here relied on fish and other aquatic animals, but they also stored food so they could have what they needed year-round. It would have been great to have wild food on hand.

I was doing a lot of walking as I looked around for food. It was surprisingly tedious to find and gather sustenance. This is where it comes in handy to know your neighborhood very well — down to what plants grow at what intersection. Community can also be a big help. While one person might spend four hours looking for and gathering burdock root, three others can use that same time to go out and get three other kinds of foods in three other places. Together we can do so much more than one person can accomplish alone. The opportunity to share our knowledge and barter or share goods are also huge benefits. Maybe you didn't save enough acorns last fall, but your neighbor has more than she needs. Maybe you don't know where to go to catch bass, but your friend does. You don't have to be a maverick to survive. You just need a group of people

who are all in it together.

The best way to identify edible plants is to meet them with an expert, in person, on a foraging walk. It can sometimes be difficult to accurately recognize them from photographs alone.

Every plant on the planet has a gift to give humans, but a few are extremely poisonous in all but the very tiniest of doses. For this reason it is imperative that anyone who wants to start supplementing their diet with wild greens first learn to identify the toxic plants and know how to

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distinguish them from edible look-alikes. For instance, poison hemlock and wild carrot are two plants that are prolific around Portland. They look almost identical, but while wild carrot is a tasty food, poison hemlock is deadly.

For information on safety, plant identification and further resources on wild food in general, such as books and photos and other learning opportunities, check out my wilderness skills blog, [www.FirstWays.com](http://www.FirstWays.com). And check out the fantastic primer called "Feral Forager: A Guide to Living Off Nature's Bounty in Urban, Rural and Wilderness Areas," available for download at [zinelibrary.info](http://zinelibrary.info).

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