

NON-NATIVE SWEET BRIAR ROSE

# FORAGE AHEAD

How to responsibly find edible plants in the wild BY MIKE BIVINS

For most Eugeneans, “foraging” means a trip to Market of Choice or The Kiva. But the ability to forage for food in the wild, a throwback from our hunter-gatherer days, has a certain appeal and lets food-intrepid adventurers connect their nourishment to the outdoors.

Pat Patterson, currently a volunteer master gardener with Lane County’s Oregon State University Extension, has been foraging since her grandmother tasked her with

gathering stinging nettle and other wild greens when she was young. Foraging is “very in,” Patterson says.

And though it’s trendy, responsible foraging means supplementing your diet with other foods and being careful not to overharvest.

Patterson moved to Oregon in 1961, and now, in her 70s, she passes on her knowledge of plants to students through the extension.

Foraging should be done responsibly, she says, cautioning

that foragers must “know the plant.” If you misidentify a plant and end up with poison hemlock instead of wild carrot, you could poison yourself or others.

Hemlock is acutely poisonous to humans, and you don’t even have to eat it — the poison can be absorbed through the skin. Patterson steers clear of wild carrots altogether, she says.

Patterson also advises to “never take all” in an area where your plant grows, because this gives the plants a chance to reproduce and to “keep the food coming.”

Additionally, she warns, potential foragers must watch out for aerial pesticide spraying.

Local herbalist Howie Brounstein outlines a few tips for beginning foragers on his Columbines School of Botanical Studies website, including obtaining a harvesting permit for foraging on public lands. The Eugene District Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Springfield issues permits for BLM land.

Foraging is useful for commercial endeavors, as well. Though the ingredients gathered are free, the plant stands do not belong to any one person, says Old Growth Ales co-founder Amanda Helser who, along with business partner Steve Braun, make alcoholic beverages containing healthy ingredients harvested in the Cascadia bioregion, such as stinging nettle, dandelions, elderberry and St. John’s wort.

Helser lists several ethical considerations when foraging for wild plants, echoing Patterson’s words about knowing what to pick before you pick it. Another tip is to leave the area where you are foraging in better condition than when you found it. This can be accomplished by picking up discarded plant material, filling in holes or even spreading seeds about.

Helser recommended reading Michael Moore’s *Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West* and Jim Pojar’s *Plants of the Pacific Northwest* to learn more about foraging for wild ingredients. ■

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