

Home cooking

Edible plants you might have in your own yard

By **DANIEL NEMAN**
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Outdoorsman and writer Euell Gibbons famously said that the naturally sweet flavor of Grape-Nuts cereal “reminds me of wild hickory nuts.”

The implication, of course, is that he had eaten wild hickory nuts and that, by extension, you almost certainly hadn’t. Which is true, at least in my case.

Gibbons’ whole schtick was that he went around eating nuts and berries and God knows what else that most of us would never even think of eating, and that they were nutritious and delicious — even if they didn’t remind him of popular breakfast cereals.

That would be funny, though. “This lichen reminds me of Post Toasties.” “The bark of this Giant Sequoia reminds me of Cap’n Crunch.”

Gibbons died in 1975, but his spirit lives on in anyone who sees something growing and thinks, “That’s an unusual plant I might want to eat.”

The fact is, the number of edible plants is far greater than the number of plants that we typically consume. And that is good to know if you are starving and in a forest.

This week, I decided to try some foods scavenged from plants that are reasonably easy to find and turn out to be surprisingly edible.

Such as sunflowers. Sunflowers have recently been discovered to be edible by the world of TikTok, after a viral Facebook post from Missouri’s Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Co., and now half the world goes around grilling the heads of sunflowers.

I decided to follow the trend to see if grilled sunflower heads were any good.

It turns out that they aren’t bad at all. Everyone says they are reminiscent of corn, but to me they are more of a cross between an artichoke and a handful of roasted sunflower seeds.

The trick is getting the sunflowers in the right season. The flowers should be well past their peak, with the petals falling off, or just about to. You pull off the petals, if there are any, and use your fingers or thumbs to brush away the fuzzy yellow flower part of the flower. What remains is an edible pod holding up to a thousand or more sunflower seeds. The shells on these seeds should still be soft, or it will be unpleasant to eat.

Cooking them is a snap. Just brush the pod with olive oil and season with plenty of salt and pepper. TikTokers like to come up with other toppings, from sundried tomato oil to garlic, but I kept my version simple. Sometimes, simple is best.

One easily foraged food that is surprisingly flavorful, in a good way, is purslane.

Purslane is a weed that grows practically everywhere. It is often found in the cracks in sidewalks or in gravel or just about anywhere that other plants don’t usually grow. My wife grows it in a pot because it is pretty.

But it is also delicious

and, because it is absolutely full of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants, it is actually one of the most nutrition-dense foods you can eat. It does have a little oxalic acid in it, though, so if you suffer from kidney stones, it is probably best not to eat too much of it.

Purslane is a succulent, and its leaves, stems and flowers are all edible. You can cook it (try scrambling it in eggs) or eat it raw. I chopped mine up raw and put it in a simple cucumber-tomato salad; that way, the purslane’s pleasant salty and lightly sour flavor really came through.

If there is a weed that is more prevalent than purslane, it is dandelions. Dandelions are more prevalent than anything. After the nuclear apocalypse or the alien destruction, all that will be left on Earth will be cockroaches roaming through the dandelions.

Which is fortunate for them, because dandelion leaves are edible. They were actually in vogue at fancy restaurants a few years ago, and I think we can all agree we are happy that fad is over.

Unless you get them when they first pop up in the spring, dandelion leaves are fairly bitter. They’re not unpleasant, exactly, but neither are they particularly pleasant. Like a less tasty version of arugula, they are best used sparingly, as an astringent counterpoint to somewhat sweeter lettuces.

I served mine with a light vinaigrette, and I used wild strawberries as a visually appealing garnish. Wild strawberries also grow with abandon in poorly tended yards, like mine, and are easily foraged. They taste essentially like nothing, but it’s the taste of nothing with the faintest hint of strawberry.

Grape leaves are also easily accessible, if you know where to find them. You can simply pick them off a grapevine if you have one, or your neighbor does. Our community garden has grapevines, but I forgot about them, and I knew I could steal a few from a neighborhood restaurant with the vines. But I decided to do the honorable thing and buy them in a jar. I’m sure there are other things you can do with grape leaves, but why bother when you can make dolmades?

Dolmades are the popular Greek, Turkish and Cypriot dish of grape leaves stuffed with rice and other ingredients. Lamb is a popular choice, but I followed tradition and kept mine vegetarian. Along with the rice, I stuffed them with onions, pine nuts, tomatoes and currants.

The key is to simmer them in water with plenty of lemon juice in it. The lemon juice really brings this treat to life.

I had also thought about cooking some pokeweed, which is almost as ubiquitous as dandelions, and even went so far as to pick some leaves. But even though pokeweed is fairly commonly eaten, unless it is prepared correctly it is also toxic.

It is poisonous when eaten raw, despite the misleading name poke salad. To make sure you are safe, you have to boil it in three changes of water for a half hour or so.

I decided I didn’t want to bother boiling anything for a half hour in the hopes

of having it not kill me. So I went to the grocery store instead and picked up something nice for dinner.

GRILLED SUNFLOWER HEADS

Yield: Depends on size of sunflower

1 sunflower head, see note
Olive oil
Salt and pepper
Optional toppings such as butter, garlic butter, garlic salt, paprika, chopped fresh herbs, sundried tomatoes, vinaigrette or spices.
Note: Pick a sunflower head in late summer, when the flower just starts to droop. There should be seeds under the yellow fuzzy flower part, but the shells should still be soft.

1. Prepare a medium-hot grill.
2. Remove the sunflower’s petals, if any, and use your fingers to brush off the yellow fuzzy flower part. Rinse thoroughly. Brush with plenty of olive oil or flavored olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Add dry optional toppings, if you want: garlic salt, paprika or spices.
3. Place the sunflower head face-down on the grill. Cover and cook 5 minutes.
4. If desired, add optional wet or fresh toppings: butter, vinaigrette, fresh herbs. Eat as you would a corn on the cob; forks are also suitable.

Ingredients are too variable for nutritional analysis.
— Recipe by Daniel Neman

TOMATO, CUCUMBER AND PURSLANE SALAD

Yield: 2 to 3 servings

1 large cucumber, peeled, seeded and chopped
1 bunch purslane, thick stems removed, leaves chopped, about ½ cup
1 medium tomato, chopped
1 jalapeno pepper, seeded and minced
2 to 3 tablespoons lemon juice
Salt

Combine all ingredients in a serving bowl. Salt to taste.
Per serving (based on 2): 40 calories; 1 g fat; no saturated fat; no cholesterol; 2 g protein; 10 g carbohydrate; 5 g sugar; 2 g fiber; 89 mg sodium; 39 mg calcium
— Recipe by Elise Bauer in simplyrecipes.com

SALAD WITH DANDELION LEAVES

Yield: 4 servings

5 large leaves of romaine lettuce, rinsed and dried
5 leaves of leaf lettuce (red or green), rinsed and dried
20 fresh dandelion leaves, preferably in the spring
12 cherry tomatoes
1/3 cup sweet onion, diced
1/3 cup toasted walnuts
4 large strawberries, rinsed and sliced
6 tablespoons your favorite vinaigrette

Mix together all ingredients.
Per serving: 300 calories; 26 g fat; 4 g saturated fat; no cholesterol; 5 g protein; 19 g carbohydrate; 8 g sugar; 5 g fiber; 303 mg sodium; 87 mg calcium
— Recipe by Daniel Neman

STUFFED GRAPE LEAVES (DOLMADES)

Yield: 4 servings

1 tablespoon black currants



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Tomato, Cucumber and Purslane Salad, sitting in a bed of white purslane flowers.

1/4 cup olive oil
1 small onion, minced (1/2 cup)
3 or 4 scallions, white and green parts, minced
2 tablespoons pine nuts
1/2 cup long-grain rice
2 medium tomatoes, peeled seeded and chopped, or 2 canned tomatoes, drained and chopped
Salt and pepper
1/4 cup hot water
1/4 teaspoon ground allspice, or more to taste
About 25 grape leaves, see note
1/4 cup fresh lemon juice
Note: If the grape leaves are fresh (as opposed to canned or jarred), rinse them and place them in a colander. Bring a tea kettle of water to boil and pour over the grape leaves. They should be soft enough to roll. If not, repeat with more boiling water.

1. Put the currants in a small bowl and cover with hot water to soften while you prepare the rest of the stuffing.
2. Warm the olive oil in a saucepan over medium-low heat and gently sauté the onion and scallions for 15 minutes or until they are thoroughly softened but not browned. Add the pine nuts and continue cooking a few minutes longer, until golden.
3. Add the rice and stir to coat thoroughly with the oil. Add the tomatoes, salt and pepper, and pour in the hot water. Mix well, cover and cook over gentle heat until all the liquid has been absorbed, about 10 minutes. The rice will start to soften but will not be cooked. Remove from the heat, stir in the allspice and drained currants, and set aside, covered, for 10 minutes.
4. Rinse the grape leaves. Place one leaf with the smooth side down on a counter. Remove the stem, if attached. Place a spoonful of stuffing at the base of the leaf, where the stem was attached, about ½ inch from the edge. Fold the bottom edge up around the stuffing, then fold in each side, right and left. Carefully roll the leaf, making a compact bundle, toward the point.
5. Place the stuffed grape leaves in the bottom of a heavy kettle or large saucepan; they should fit comfortably without being wedged in tightly, so they can expand as the rice in the stuffing cooks. You can make layers in the kettle or pan, but put them in



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Grilled sunflower heads.

the opposite direction of the layer below: If the bottom layer faces left to right, make the upper layer front to back.

6. Add lemon juice and water just to cover the grape leaves. Set a plate just smaller than the pan upside-down on top of the grape leaves, cover the kettle or pan, and simmer gently for about 25 to 30 minutes or until the rice

and grape leaves are thoroughly cooked. Serve with lemon wedges and a drizzle of olive oil.

Per serving: 264 calories; 16 g fat; 2 g saturated fat; no cholesterol; 4 g protein; 30 g carbohydrate; 6 g sugar; 4 g fiber; 600 mg sodium; 91 mg calcium

— Recipe from “The New Mediterranean Diet Cookbook” by Nancy Harmon Jenkins

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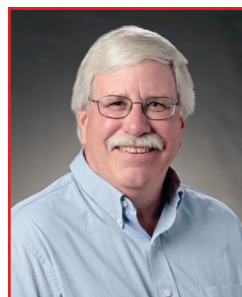


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