

Wild Food



The subject of how to identify wild growing food is taught to military personnel who could find themselves in a survival situation, or operating in areas where the resupply of rations is just not possible. It is best to learn a few of the common wild edible plants and stick to them. This is important as on some plants, only certain parts are edible, and there are many poisonous plants that look similar to safe ones. So, before you start to eat anything that you find growing in the wild, the food needs to be positively identified as safe. This is where pre-learning (and this article) becomes relevant. The time of year is also an important factor, as the months of late summer and early autumn will provide a larger selection of wild foods then compared to what will be available during winter and early spring.

Blackberry (Brambles)



A typical thicket of brambles

Probably one of the most iconic wild shrubs, best known for its sharp thorns. It grows in an untidy twisted fashion in all kinds of places such as waste land, woodland and hedges. The stems arch over and are covered in thorns and groups of green leaves. During the period between August and October, the shrub produces an edible berry which turns from green, to red, then black in colour when ripe, and these black ones are extremely juicy. Only eat the black coloured berries that look shiny and fresh - not the ones which look dull and shrivelled, or the berries that have mould on them. Once picked, the blackberry should be cleaned and eaten straight away, as they will go off very quickly. The berries are a source of vitamin C.



Blackberries in the different stages of growth. The black ones are ripe and ready for picking

Hazel Nuts



A cluster of hazel nuts in early August

The hazel tree is one of my favourites. It is quite small in size and sometimes referred to as a shrub. It grows in clumps of straight stems and has toothed oval shaped leaves. It can be found in woodlands, underneath the canopy of larger trees, and also in hedgerows. Hazel nuts grow in clusters on the tree, and they are ready to eat between late August and October with ripe hazel nuts turning brown in colour. The nut is ovoid in shape and is surrounded by a protective husk which will need to be cracked open. Sometimes however, the husk is empty but there is no way of telling if it contains a nut until you break into it. There is substantial evidence which suggests that these nuts were an important part of our ancestors diet due to being a source of protein and carbohydrates.



The husk cracked open to reveal the hazel nut

Beech Nut



Beech nuts which are still slightly green

The beech tree is a tall, broadleaf tree that is commonly found in woodlands within the UK. It can grow up to 40 metres in height, and has a smooth grey coloured bark. The leaves are oval in shape with a pointed tip and are glossy green which grow in an alternate pattern along the branch. When the tree reaches around forty years of age, it will start to produce beech nuts. The nuts are protected in a small spikey husk which hangs from the branches. During the months of September and October the husk will open up to reveal the ripened nut and will fall from the tree. The beech nut itself is three sided and further contained in a thin protective shell which can be easily peeled away. Although small in size, the nut is a good source of oil, fat and protein so it makes a good survival food. The only downside is that the beech tree will only produce nuts every three to four years. Take this into consideration with the fact that only mature beech trees actually starts to form nuts, and it can turn into a hit and miss exercise whether or not you find a beech nut inside the husk, or just an empty shell. If you are lucky enough to find a nut, then it can be eaten raw.



The leaves of the beech tree



Once ripe, the husk opens up to reveal the beech nut



The husk, shell and beech nut

Hawthorn



Hawthorn in fruit during mid-August

The Hawthorn is a small tree / shrub which can grow pretty much anywhere. The branches have short thorns along them and the leaves are small, oval in shape and have deep lobes. The young

leaves can be eaten during early spring. An edible flower grows on the hawthorn between May and June. The flower is white in colour and has five petals. The red berry (known as the Haw) is present between August and late November. The berry grows between the thorns on the branches which makes picking them fiddly. The berry can be eaten raw, with the flesh tasting quite nice. Unfortunately, there is a large stone in the middle of the berry which is not edible so the flesh needs to be peeled away and the stone discarded. Care should be taken when eating red berries as some are poisonous, so it is important to correctly identify that what you are eating is safe. The berries of the hawthorn remain on the tree long after the leaves have fallen in late autumn and winter. The leaves are a good identification feature, and without them, extra care should be taken to ensure that you have positively identified what you are about to eat.



The edible May flower of Hawthorn



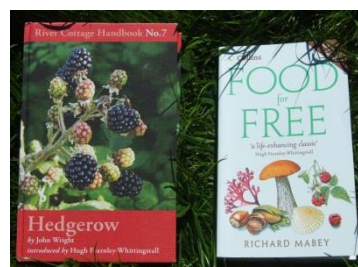
Hawthorn leaves are small and deep lobed



The haw which contains a large UN EDIBLE stone

The selection of berries and nuts that I have described here are all commonly found in the UK and are edible raw (apart from the haw stone), so they can be eaten on the move without the need for cooking or boiling. I want to reinforce the importance of positively identifying the wild food which you are about to eat. 'If in doubt – leave it out' is a good phrase to remember. As I have already said, it is best to learn a few edible plants, nuts and berries well, rather than trying to memorise a vast array of wild foods and risk getting it wrong. It is a good idea to clean the food that you have picked before eating it. Don't eat old and wilting leaves and fruit as they could have built up toxins. Try to avoid collecting the wild food from areas of possible contamination such as industrial areas and busy roadsides. Also be aware of areas that could have been sprayed with chemicals such as weed killers.

I have spent quite a few years learning about wild plants and their uses as a food source. I would advise anyone who is planning to go foraging for wild foods to purchase some good field guides on the subject. 'Hedgerow', written by John Wright is part of the River Cottage Handbook series, is very informative and does have some good quality photographs of both edible and poisonous plants which help with safe identification. Also, 'Food for Free', written by Richard Mabey is well illustrated and a very descriptive book on the subject. Both books have proved invaluable to me.



Two good sources for further reference