



How to be a good forager

Kate Blincoe describes the pleasures of gathering wild food

With a blade, I flicked the mussels off the rocks into my waiting bucket. Purple-shelled, they lay on a bed of sea lettuce and samphire. Later, cooked together in white wine and cream, my seaside discoveries created a marine feast. This was food at its best – fresh, seasonal, packaging-free, and utterly delicious.

If you enjoy food and love to spend time outdoors, then foraging soon becomes a way of life. You see the world differently – pretty elderflowers bursting into creamy bud are still charming, but you will scrutinise them to pinpoint that perfect moment when the buds unfurl, ready to harvest for your fragrant cordial.

A simple walk becomes an opportunity to gather. Recently, a woodland stroll saw us returning with a few handfuls of ramsons, or wild garlic, which I crushed into butter with a little salt, smeared onto ciabatta and baked, to make wild garlic bread. I'm quietly

awaiting the blackberries, hazelnuts and chestnuts.

Foraging connects you deeply to Nature. After all, taste is the most intimate of our senses. When a wrong choice could kill you or make you unwell, suddenly knowledge is everything. You will check and check again that your identification is correct, and on seeking the advice of an expert, learn more than you ever set out to. Even today, I am wary of most mushroom types unless I am accompanied by a more experienced gatherer.

Safety is about more than accidentally eating something poisonous. It's advisable to avoid dog height (!), to pick well away from traffic fumes, and to check your skin and clothing for ticks if you've been walking through undergrowth.

The foraging guides online by the Woodland Trust are very accessible for beginners. Richard Mabey's *Food for Free* in pocket size is a worthwhile field companion whatever your level of experience.

We spend years training children out of their innate desire to taste the world around them. My own two ate books, mud and insects if my back was turned for two seconds. Yet when children are old enough to understand safety, they take to foraging with relish. Expert little fingers will pluck the petals from deadnettles, sucking the sweet nectar found there, or pick the tiny wild strawberries that are practically invisible from adult height.

Foraging is the antithesis of supermarket shopping, where everything is always available whatever the weather or time of year. Sometimes you will return empty-handed from a foray. It also comes with the responsibility that we can easily absolve ourselves of when in a shop.

A good forager will never trespass and will always leave plenty for next time and for Nature. If you dig up plants, they will be killed, whereas if you just snip off a few leaves from each, the plant will continue to grow. Similarly, whilst I want plenty of blackberries for

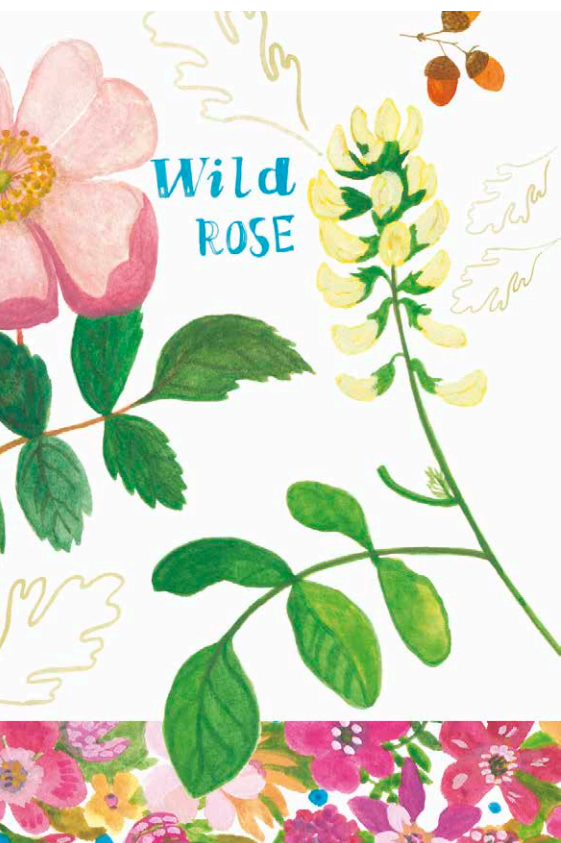


Illustration by Rachel Grant www.rachel-grant.com

my crumble, I will always leave plenty for the creatures who depend on them for their survival.

When I don my rubber gloves and pick young nettles, I am conscious that I am stepping outside the norms of society – I do look slightly mad by modern standards. However, foraging was once not only normal, but vital.

After all, for a vast stretch of human history, we survived by foraging for wild plants and animals. Even when agriculture became widespread, many people still depended on hedgerow and field edge for food and for medicinal plants such as yarrow and elderflower (which were often combined with peppermint to break a fever).

Today, fewer of us in the western world need to forage to prevent starvation, yet when we do we are feeding not only our bellies, but also our knowledge and that deep, forgotten part of ourselves that is animal and truly part of Nature. R

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PUFFBALL MUSHROOM PIZZA

The giant puffball mushroom is a white globe that can grow as big as your head, with a tasty, earthy flavour and firm texture.

This magnificent and entertaining fungus is also the safest way to introduce some wild mushroom into your diet because it is so easy to identify. Look out for them on grassy meadows and field edges. Just check that your mushroom is bigger than a grapefruit, and – cut from bottom to top – is pure white throughout. Look on www.wildfooduk.com for useful images and descriptions.

The puffball is very versatile and can be used like any mushroom: stir-fried, cooked in garlic butter, baked or grilled... My favourite way is as a very healthy pizza base, making this a low-carb and gluten-free way to enjoy pizza.

PUFFBALL PIZZA

Customise with your own favourite toppings, but here is a basic puffball Margherita. Serves 4.

Ingredients

- 1 giant puffball
- 1 medium-sized onion, finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- Salt and pepper
- 400g tin chopped tomatoes
- 2 tbsp tomato purée
- pinch of sugar
- 1 ball of mozzarella, shredded
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 1 tbsp olive oil for the sauce – more will be needed for brushing the puffball slices

1. Heat a saucepan over a medium heat and add the oil. Once hot, add the onion and a pinch of salt and fry for 4–5 minutes until softened. Add the garlic and cook for a further 2 minutes.
2. Pour in the tomatoes and tomato purée and season with pepper, more salt if needed, the oregano and a pinch of sugar. Reduce the heat and simmer gently for 20–30 minutes until the sauce has thickened to a jam-like consistency.
3. Next, slice your puffball into discs about 2cm thick. Each of these is a pizza base.
4. Heat the grill to hot. Brush oil on both sides of the puffball slices, season with salt and pepper and grill for 2–3 minutes on each side until soft.
5. Now top with the tomato sauce and mozzarella (and any other toppings you fancy). Grill until the cheese is melted and bubbling, which should take another 2–3 minutes.

Edited recipe from Kate Blincoe's book, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Green Parenting* (Green Books, 2015).