

# Nature's Larder

Forager *Liz Knight* uses the fresh leafy growth of spring's wildflowers to create beautiful seasonal dishes



## SPRING FORAGING



Honesty flowers



Ground elder



Greater stitchwort

Spring is a fruitful time to go foraging. So many plants start to emerge quickly and as a result, there are incredible flavours available from the young growth, whether it is from buds, blossom or foliage.

It is hard to better the flavour of freshly foraged plants with produce available in shops. For years, breeders have selected crops for uniformity rather than taste, with the result that some intensively bred crops have reduced flavour when compared to plants that are in a natural state.

Foraging turns the traditional approach to gardening on its head. Many of the most delicious leaves are plants gardeners normally think of as weeds. But a session weeding out the first spring flush of weed growth can turn into a time for harvesting, too.

Dandelions, nettles and stickyweed (also known as goosegrass or cleavers) are all great spring ingredients. Stickyweed (*Galium aparine*) has a mild, peppery taste. Its long shoots are excellent chopped up and added to a salsa verde with ground elder shoots. Ground elder is another weed that many gardeners loathe, but this carrot family member has a taste somewhere between lovage, carrot and angelica.

Bittercress (*Cardamine hirsuta*) is a

common weed, which has a delicious mustard-like flavour. Despite the name, the taste isn't bitter at all but delicious, like a mustardy form of cress. It is also packed with vitamin C and antioxidants. The tiny leaves have a pretty shape and just a sprig or two makes for a superb looking garnish.

Much-maligned nettles contain an amazing quantity of nutrients. They can be used as a leafy vegetable in the same way as spinach and as a flavouring. I even add them to marmalade. Happily, once the leaves are chopped up, they lose their ability to sting.

As well as weeds, there are other sources of superb spring flavour available to forage. Hawthorn shoots have a mild taste when eaten raw but there is a hidden pepperiness that is only discovered when the shoots are cooked. It is a good substitute for parsley and a tasty flavouring for fish cakes and fish pies. The blossom of hawthorn has an almondy, vanilla-like flavour and the leaves make a good herbal tea.

Whichever crops you seek out, avoid foraging in industrial or polluted areas, especially if foraging for nettles because they absorb so much from their surrounding environment. Also, try to forage in an area that you know hasn't been treated with chemical herbicides. Back gardens are the best place to start.

## WILD SPRING RECIPES

I've been alive for quite a few winters and springs. I know that every year the bare brown trees and earth will again be covered in tender vibrant greens – but somehow each winter is long enough to make me wonder if its ending will ever come. It makes the arrival of spring feel like the most unexpected, but longed for visitor. Perhaps it is the absence that makes my heart grow so fond of spring, or perhaps it is the flavours that are so magical they almost shock you with every mouthful; whatever the cause, spring is without a doubt my favourite time of year to eat.

### 1 WILD GREEN GAZPACHO WITH MAGNOLIA DRESSING

Spring greens are full of delicious perfume – all our cultivated plants come originally from the wild, yet so often the more we tame plants, the more we water down the incredible natural flavours.

This soup is a celebration of the sensational flavours of spring. It is a unique recipe that depends on the available plants. Simply blend together the top ingredients in a food processor for the base of your soup, and add any of the flavours below according to what you have to hand. Make sure the leaves are tender, and young – this is a soup for a short but delicious season.

#### INGREDIENTS

Ice cubes  
200ml water  
2 tbsp natural yogurt  
Salt and pepper  
Juice of 1 lemon or 100ml cider vinegar  
2 tsp sugar  
A handful of asparagus tips (the thick end is too tough to griddle)  
1 cucumber

**A handful each of:** ground elder, green beech, lime or linden (*Tilia*) leaves, mint leaves, blackcurrant leaves, fennel fronds, sorrel leaves, greater stitchwort, vetch leaves and stems, pea shoots.

**A blend of any (or all) of the following:** hedge garlic (jack-by-the-hedge), honesty or bittercress leaves and tender stems, wild garlic, pennywort, cleavers shoots, chickweed, nettle tips, dandelion leaves, hawthorn leaves, angelica leaves.

**To decorate:** honesty flowers and young seed pods, tulip petals, magnolia petals, vetch or stitchwort flowers.



Along with the base ingredients for the soup, use whatever leaves are available.



Simply blend freshly foraged greens to create a vibrant, flavourful gazpacho.

#### METHOD

- Coarsely chop all the herbs and place them in a blender or juicer with all the ingredients, except the vinegar and lemon juice. Reserve the flowers for decoration. Blitz in a food processor until smooth.
- Add the vinegar or lemon juice, then season the soup with salt, pepper and a little more sugar to taste.
- Serve the soup with slivers of tulip petals, and flowers from the mustard family, such as honesty or magnolia petals. Garnish with a drizzle of magnolia dressing (see recipe below) and serve with fresh bread. Eat the soup immediately because, as with avocados, this soup's green glory blackens in the air over time. If you wish to keep it for later, cover with baking paper and store in the fridge.

#### MAGNOLIA DRESSING

Magnolias boast one of the most exquisite edible flowers – both in appearance and taste. Do not despair when the tree drops its petals, but gather them up and preserve their flavour in this delicious rice wine dressing. Additionally, whole, unblemished



Young vetch leaves have a pea-like flavour and make a delicious soup ingredient.

petals make a superb serving cup for dainty canapes – that unexpected frost suddenly becomes an excuse for a feast.

- Pack washed magnolia petals into a glass jar and pour over the warmed sweet rice wine vinegar. Seal the jar and place it in the fridge. The dressing will be ready to use within 24 hours, but left for a few days the flavour will intensify. It is perfect when used sparingly on bitter leaved salads and warm onion tarts.



## 2 WILD GREMOLATA WITH PORK & SPELT

I live near the vast Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, home to a population of wild boar and a springtime shag-pile carpet of wild garlic. Pork and garlic are a partnership made in heaven, and this recipe celebrates spring in the forest.

Gremolata is an Italian condiment traditionally made with garlic, lemon zest and parsley. Our wild version's shining star is a close relative of parsley – ground elder. I can't guarantee this recipe will solve your ground elder eradication issues, but at least you'll be able to eat your weedings.

### INGREDIENTS

Wild boar haunch or outdoor reared slow roast cut of pork (I enjoy the underrated pork hand cut)  
 Wild garlic  
 Lemon balm (*Melissa*)  
 Young ground elder shoots  
 Sorrel leaves  
 Organic unwaxed lemon  
 Olive oil, salt and pepper  
 200g spelt grains  
 Finely chopped onion  
 Glass of white wine

### METHOD

- Heat the oven to 220°C. Place the meat in an oven-proof dish, pour over a cup of boiling water, season with salt and pepper and drizzle with oil. Place in the oven and immediately turn the temperature down to 120°C. Slowly roast the pork for 4-5 hours, until the meat is tender and pulls apart. Remove from the oven, cover and rest. De-glaze the dish with a glass of white wine and reserve the juices.
- In a frying pan, sweat the onions in butter until translucent and add the spelt grains, ensuring they are coated in the butter. Using a ladle, add the wine and pork juices as if making a risotto. Cook until the spelt is tender.
- Place the pork on top of the spelt, cover and return to a low oven to keep warm.
- Meanwhile, finely chop the ground elder, wild garlic, sorrel and lemon balm leaves. Zest an organic unwaxed lemon and mix the leaves and zest in a bowl with a squeeze of lemon juice. Lightly coat the chopped leaves with olive oil. Either leave the gremolata quite coarse, or purée it in a processor for a smoother sauce.
- Remove the pork from the oven, spoon over the gremolata and serve with asparagus.



Wild garlic, lemon and olive oil create a gremolata that tastes of spring.



Chop the leaves for a coarse gremolata, or puree the ingredients until smooth.

## FRESH TO FORAGE

The countryside bursts with flavoursome leaves

Spring is the ideal time to start foraging if you haven't done it before. The flavours are at their best and plants are more easily identified when the hedgerows are not yet fully grown. Nettles and dandelions are familiar to most gardeners. Use young nettle leaves as a spinach substitute, and think of dandelions as a bitter salad leaf, like chicory. Other weeds to try include sorrel, jack-by-the-hedge and goosegrass or cleavers. Among edible flowers, try primrose (*Primula vulgaris*) and scented elderflowers.



Jack-by-the-hedge (*Alliaria petiolata*) leaves have a strong garlicky kick.



In spring, young, fresh hawthorn leaves add a nutty taste to salads.



Try lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) in a fruit salad or in a herby dressing.



## 3 SWEET WOODRUFF CRÈME CARAMELS

This is the season of deep flavoured edible flowers. Their herby notes verge on savoury, but they are the ultimate flavour adornment for a silky sweet woodruff crème caramel drizzled with birch or maple syrup.

### INGREDIENTS

- 3 sprigs of sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), dried to release its vanilla flavour
- 300ml full fat milk
- 300ml single cream
- 4 large eggs
- 25g sugar or birch sugar
- 2 butter biscuits crushed with a few finely chopped rosemary leaves.
- Birch sap or amber (dark) maple syrup

### METHOD

- Warm the milk and cream in a pan, and add to it the sprigs of sweet woodruff. Let the flavour of the sweet woodruff infuse the warm liquid for at least half an hour. While the sweet woodruff is infusing, whisk together the eggs and sugar.



Whisk eggs and sugar, then add the infused milk to form a custard.

- Whisk the milk into the egg and sugar mixture and pour this into single ramekins or a shallow dish. Place the dish(es) into a large, shallow oven-proof dish and fill the outside container with water, to create a bain-marie effect. Place the dish in an oven preheated to 150°C and cook for 20-30 minutes, or until the custard has set.
- Serve quenelles of the crème caramel with a garnish of rosemary, violet, gorse or white dead nettle flowers. Sprinkle with the crushed butter biscuits and a little rosemary. Finally drizzle over the birch sap or maple syrup. ■