

Edible Weeds, Common Plants and Foraging around Perth

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While this is an article on edible weeds around Perth, most are non native and invasive, so there is a good chance they will be in your neighborhood to.

Most people are shocked...or amused, I just can't tell, at the things I try when I am asked if it's edible, but I have done lots of research prior to putting it in my mouth. The reason I will eat it rather than just saying yes is 'the power of the guinea pig', people are rightly worried about eating food that may be poisonous. This article is to get you starting to think about and utilise these readily available, mineral rich, food sources. However, feed the mind, then the body, do your research!!

I highly recommend getting a \$35 copy of, **Western Weeds – A Guide to weeds of WA** (http://www.wswa.org.au/pps_publications.htm), as a weed guide, it doesn't tell you which are edible but it has clear photographic identification and botanical names so you can ID the plants you have. Once you know what it is, searching its edibility and medicinal uses is both easy and truly astounding. There is plenty of info on the internet, but a few books you could look for are, Wild Food A.B and J.W CRIB, by the same authors, Wild Medicine (good info on natives and weeds, very few pictures), Wild Food Plants by Tim Low and Self-Sufficiency and Survival Foods by Isabell Shipard.

Eating weeds is best approached from a 'super food' perspective, most are highly mineralized and powerful plants, eating them alone may not be enjoyable, but, putting a handful of mixed weed greens in a salad greatly increased interest, nutrition and food security. Many of the tougher or strong flavored weeds/herbs can be used the traditional way of throwing plant material in a pot roast or drying to make a tea. Currently we are fortunate that we can mix edible and medicinal weeds with normal vegetables to introduce ourselves gradually and learn the names and flavors along the way.

Take this gentle introduction opportunity now as you may find yourself relying solely on weeds later.

Again I caution do take care identifying weeds prior to eating them. Good pictures, knowledgeable friends or local groups, and hands on foraging workshops are helpful. When foraging food not in your own backyard ensure the plant has not been sprayed/contaminated. **If it looks sick don't eat it.**

English Dandelion – *Taraxacum Officinale*

The English dandelions are perennial plants meaning leaves will grow back if the taproot is left intact. When harvesting just pick individual leaves out of the centre of the crown. Dandelion leaves are generally eaten raw or boiled in salads, the flower petals, along with other ingredients, are used to make dandelion wine and the ground, roasted roots to make dandelion coffee. Transplant some to your garden beds as they grow more lush and palatable.



Dandelion leaves contain abundant vitamins and minerals, especially vitamins A, C and K, and are good sources of calcium, potassium, iron and manganese.

Smooth Cats Ear and Flat Weed – *Hypochaeris glabra /radicata*

These are the Australian equivalent of English Dandelion, and while less palatable are still highly nutritious.



Though these are very bitter the young leaves and roots are edible. As with capeweed excessive consumption can cause deficiencies with cattle

Capeweed – *Arctotheca calendula*

The young leaves of this plant can be safely cooked as spinach. Its best not to eat raw due to dermatitis and high mineral levels. While excessive grassing by cattle can cause deficiencies, tainted milk the occasionally capeweed leaf quicke will be fine for us. http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/dpi/vro/vrosite.nsf/pages/sip_capeweed



Sow Thistle - *Sonchus oleraceus*

A very common verge and garden weed growing well in poor, sandy, and dry soil, it produces yellow flowers, puffy seed-heads, and oozes white sap from broken stems (hence is often incorrectly called milk thistle). Leaves are best harvested before the plant bolts and goes to flower. Mild bitter flavor less so than dandelion or chicory, so great salad greens, if you are pushed for food, the whole plant can be blanched to reduce bitterness.



Guilford Grass - *Romulea Rosea Australis*

Sometimes called onion grass the green plump, 1 cm long fruit makes for a nice chewy sweet snack. I certainly ate it by choice as a child. When they exist in large numbers wait until winter rain then pull them out of the soft ground, the corms are also edible, they are similar to water chestnuts or could be dried and turned into flour. Leaves are also apparently edible but given the lawnmower can cut them I shall pass at this point.



Sour Sob - *Oxalis pes-caprae*, and many others

The leaves have a tasty sour edge a bit like the sour in sweet and sour sauce, it can therefore make a great sour sauce.



While they are a tasty flavor to add to a salad and a good source of Vitamin C, they are also high in oxalic acid so unless blanching and draining water eat in moderation or occasionally. Other Oxalis family, wood sorrel etc are the same.

Back Nightshade - *Solanum Nigrum* – The ripe berries (black and soft) are edible and very tasty, if you have ever had gooseberries they taste the same. Note: The green fruits are poisonous. The leaves are eaten like spinach in some African cultures but unless desperate its best to avoid eating all Solanum family leaves. I eat these berries daily as the weed is prolific, it does not suffer from spider mites like its mainstream gooseberry counterparts, so its very handy producer in my yard. The berries are medicinally regarded as a tonic.



Plantain - *Plantago - Lanceolata and Major*

Plantago Major is a great garden green, (but is less a weed than narrow Lanceolata) and while I grow and eat both occasionally I find it's a better chook and rabbit fodder. Lanceolata has narrow heavily ribbed leaves that are astringent, and while edible this plant should be consumed in a limited fashion in more of an herbal rather than food sense.



Chickweed – *Stellaria Media*

Chickweed common in winter/spring is a tasty nutty edible. Small low growing straggly and delicate weed up to 40cm high with soft lime green smooth ovate shaped leaves. The flowers are white and tiny and occur on downward pointing stalks.



It is similar to other inedible weeds, but the key distinguishing feature is a row of fine hairs on the stem that occur on one side and swap over to the other side between the leaf nodes.

Purslane (Pigweed) - *Portulaca oleracea*

A ground hugging succulent green/red herb very hardy and invasive when viewed as a weed, but change your perspective this is the easiest growing, mild tasting plant you could grow. Purslane leaves are in Omega-3 fatty acid, and has stems high in vitamin C. Use raw in salad, as a pot herb or try add handfuls of purslane sprigs to the juices in the roasting pan, once he



had removed the roast for carving it is said the greens wilt and the sauce would acquire a sharper flavour and a thicken the sauce.

Violets – *Viola Sp.*

More a garden escape, than a weed it is a vigorous soil colonizer with many varieties and flower colours, All flowers are a tasty edible as are the leaves though tasteless.



The leaves are also medicinal and have been used for coughs, sore throats, and constipation. **Note:** African Violet is not a true violet and not edible.

Clovers White and Red - *Tifolium repens and pretense*

This is a wild edible plant everyone knows. The clover leafs are delicious in salads or juices with a bean like flavour. Clovers are a valuable survival food, as they are high in protein, widespread, and abundant.



They are not easy to digest raw, but this can be easily fixed by juicing them. Dried flower heads and seed pods can also be ground up into a nutritious flour and mixed with other foods. Dried flower heads can also be steeped in hot water for a healthy, tasty tea.

Nut Grass - *Oenothera Spp.*

One of the most cursed word wide weeds, however the small hard nut-like tubers are edible and eaten raw or cooked. Don't bother with the rest of the plant parts. They often have a bitter taste, but have excellent nutritional value. It is uncommon here but the yellow nut grass is said to be the best tasting and was a food sources for native American peoples.



Wild/Green Amaranth - *Amaranthus powellii*

Several Amaranth species may be found as garden escapees. Green leaf amaranth as shown below will be most common. The leaves are best when young, they can be eaten raw, but taste better when steamed or sautéed. You might also find Loves Lies Bleeding has a spectacular red weeping seed head. All types are edible but leaf amaranths are best for leaves.



Wild Radish - *Raphanus raphanistrum*

Radish appears in spring en masse and is a foragers dream, with an entirely edible offering. Young leaves - raw or cooked given a somewhat hot taste in salads or used as a potherb. Use young leaves in spring, older leaves soon become bitter. Seed - raw or cooked has a very pungent flavour, the seed can be ground into a powder and made into a paste when it is an



excellent substitute for mustard. The sprouted seeds have a somewhat hot spicy flavour and are a tasty addition to salads. Flowers, white, yellow and sometimes pinkish, are eaten raw. The flower buds are used as a broccoli substitute, lightly steamed. Young crisp raw seedpods are great.

Evening Primrose - *Oenothera biennis*

Common evening primrose thrives in Perth's sandy soil, and is often seen in flower by the seashore. The leaves have a peppery bite and can be eaten raw or cooked, though the best, most tender leaves are those on the leaf stalk. Some people may prefer them cooked since they're a bit coarse in texture when raw. The white taproot (often tinged pink at the top) can exceed a foot in length and is, if anything, slightly more assertive than most radishes. The buds are best cooked, but the flowers are best raw. It also has a myriad of medicinal uses, so go find it!



Prickly Lettuce – *Lactuca Serriola* - Called Wild Lettuce, or Prickly lettuce due to its impressive shark teeth spikes on leaf undersides and stems, this plant was one of those that the current lettuces were bred from.



They are common everywhere around Perth in similar areas to Sow Thistle (discussed in earlier editions of enews), especially roadsides, paved areas and urban zones. The young leaves are an excellent vegetable, raw or cooked. Older leaves are coarse, spiky and very bitter.

Three Cornered Garlic - *Allium triquetrum*

Three-cornered leek, or onion weed, is a Mediterranean plant in the family Alliaceae, but can also be found anywhere wet enough and shaded. Many parts of the plant are edible and taste like garlic or onion. The plant spreads rapidly and is locally common/invasive, particularly in disturbed areas. The bulbs are obvious on the surface of the ground now as small white round single clove bulbs.



It is similar to poisonous bulbs but is easily distinguished when you crush the leaves to experience the pungent garlic odour. Don't collect loose bulbs on the surface in summer unless you are sure of the location of the winter plants.

Mallow – *Cheese Wheel Plant* - *Malva parviflora*

Mallows are mostly a stewing green as the leaves are a little fuzzy and mucilaginous. Mallows are a good weed to start foraging as all types are edible and commonly found. Its a great starter is because there are no poisonous look-alikes, and it tastes good, without the mild bitterness typically found in many of the available wild greens.



The mucilaginous quality of the mallow leaves acts as a natural thickener for the lasagna.

Fat Hen – Lambs Quarters - Goosefoot – Old King Henry - *Chenopodium album*

To most people a weed, to me a very useful hardy edible garden plant. A large annual with edible leaves, summer shade, next seasons pea/bean poles, and seeds for the cooks if you let them go to seed.



Cape Gooseberry – *Physalis peruviana*

Small lantern fruit pods with edible yellow/orange tangy fruit (eat ripe ones not green), this is not a weed, but is frequently self seeding up as the numerous tiny seed is carried by birds and deposited everywhere.



Flax (Linseed) - *Linum usitatissimum*

Normally self seeding in areas when previously grown, you might find flax in your garden, and if not go to the whole food shops and plant some. Flax seed is edible and very good for you and the plant is easy to grow. It's also great wood oil.



Fennel - *Foeniculum vulgare*

A garden escape, the weedy ones don't have a swollen bulb like the store ones, but grow easily and taste similar. It also produces lots of seed that is worth foraging for an aromatic anise flavored spice. Also a great predator bug feeder in the garden.



Nasturtium - *Tropaeolum majus*



All parts of Nasturtiums are edible. The flower has most often been consumed, making for an especially ornamental salad ingredient; it has a slightly peppery taste reminiscent of watercress, and is also used in stir fry. The flowers contain about the same amount Vit C as parsley. The unripe seed pods can be harvested and dropped into spiced vinegar to produce a condiment and garnish, sometimes used in place of capers.

An essential garden plant it is also a winter living mulch, pest trap crop and beneficial insect attractant.

Chicory – *Cichorium intybus*

Wild chicory leaves are edible but bitter. By cooking and discarding the water the bitterness is reduced, after which the chicory leaves may be sauteed with garlic, anchovies and other ingredients. The more cultivated varieties self seed also so it's a great plant to grow or forage.



Nettle – *Urtica dioica* (perennial roots) and *Urtica urens*(annual)



This plant has stingers, hairs of most nettle species contain formic acid, serotonin and histamine. Cooking will render the stings, and make a very healthy edible green, pot herb, tea or any other use.

Nettle leaves are extremely high in nutrients, so harvest with gloves, cook and enjoy.

Dock - Rumex – *acetosa* (Common Garden Sorrel), *acetosella*, *crispus*, and others.



Dock leaves have a sour flavour similar to kiwifruit or sour sauce, they may be puréed in soups and sauces or added to salads. The plant's sharp taste is due to oxalic acid, which is a toxin.

If you are eating a lot of any Rumex/Sorrel greens cook in water for 3-5 minutes and discard water dissolving/removing most oxalic acid. Oxalic acid stops calcium adsorption and uses it up, creating kidney stones and other nasty's, so be aware of this issue.

Sculpit (Strilotto)- *Silene inflata* (Sculpit), *vulgaris* (Bladder Champion)

Sculpit or Stridolo is a fast-growing, mild-mannered annual blending complex flavors of Chicory, Arugula, Tarragon and other favorite greens.



It's leaves are mild with a flavor all its own. Little known outside of Italy, Bladder Champion is often a garden escape and can be eaten the same when young.

Poppy – *Papaver hybridum*, *P. rhoeas*, *P. somniferum*



Poppies have edible seeds, much tastier cooked. Somniferum while not allowed to be grown as it is the opium poppy is commonly found in gardens and is the commercial variety that provides the small black poppy seeds.

Stinking Roger – *Tagetes Minuta*



While not edible out of hand, the dried leaves are made into a tea that has many beneficial properties. The plant is also a beneficial garden companion and mulch/compost filler.

Madeira vine - *Anredera cordifolia*

Madeira vine is an edible weed similar to ceylon spinach but with a smaller edible leaves and underground edible rhizomes (aerial tubers are not edible). It is a very vigorous weedy climbing vine and provides copious amounts of food if utilized.



Warrigal Greens (NZ Spinach)- *Tetragonia tetragonioides*



Warrigal greens or New Zealand spinach is a sprawling ground cover type plant which can as the name suggests be a spinach substitute, it needs to be blanched before eating to remove the oxalic acid which is toxic.

Pigface – *Carpobrotus* (*C. aequilaterus*, *C. edulis*, *C. virescens*)

More a coastal native than a weed, Pig face Leaves can be blanched and put in a light pickling solution. The flowers contain a sweet nectar which can be eaten. The fruits are good eating, among Australia's tastiest wild fruits. They turn purple when

ripe, and the fleshy pulp can be squeezed out and eaten.



The Bright lolly Pink flower is the *aequilaterus*, yellow flower is a naturalised South African variety *edulis*, and the native *virescens* all are edible.

Brazilian Pepper Tree - *Schinus terebinthifolius*

Brazilian pepper is a sprawling shrub or small tree, reaching a height of 7–10 m, and often grouping in thickets. Although it is not a true pepper (*Piper*), its dried drupes are often sold as pink peppercorns, as are the fruits from the related species *Schinus molle* (Peruvian peppertree).



The seeds can be used as a spice, adding a pepper-like taste to food. They are usually sold in a dry state and have a bright pink color. They are less often sold pickled in brine, where they have a dull, almost green hue.