



Wild spring plants taking root

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At about this time for the past few years, my lawn is the cause of great consternation. Several years ago, the driver of a delivery truck ran over three large burning bushes that bordered our lawn. The driver claimed he was unaware of the shrubs, but how could anybody, even in a truck, unknowingly demolish several 7-foot shrubs? But I digress.

Anyway, a few years later, something wonderful began happening all along the root lines of our decaying shrubbery: Mushrooms began to grow. My father, still with us at the time, visited one spring and I showed him the mysterious fungi. He believed they were the kind that he used to eat all the time we he was younger.

I was eager to try them, but my husband wasn't so sure and wanted me to have them checked out further. I made a deal with him that I would gather some and take them to our local extension office before eating any. Long story short, Andy Rideout gave them the thumbs down. They were what most folks call false morels, so I have never tried them. But they still appear every spring to taunt me.

This year, I learned a bit of good news concerning my nemesis 'shrooms. Wherever false morels grow, real ones will also grow. So from now on, I plan on dumping any leavings from my forays in that section of my yard. According to what I've read, it is very difficult to propagate morel mushrooms, and even a successful cropping could take a few years, but I am determined.

Spring Tonics

This time of year, both back yard and backwoods foragers may also come across ramps (wild onions), garlic or even a stray asparagus. Ramps and wild garlic enjoy invading lawns and spreading their pungent odor throughout the neighborhood after a lawn mowing. Asparagus tends to go wild and will linger on abandoned farms or along little used roadsides. At the moment, there is a small patch of asparagus growing in my driveway, planted by birds resting on the utility line overhead.

Early Appalachian settlers knew that in addition to these wild foods, spring signaled the time for gathering wild greens. While we are most familiar with poke, wild mustard and dandelion greens around here, there are a host of lesser known greens with interesting farm inspired names such as lamb's quarters, cow parsley and henbit. All of these wild leafy plants were eaten as "tonics," a natural means of purifying and thinning cold thickened blood and energizing winter weary bodies.

Shrooming Across The Country

I first fell in love with wild mushrooms about 25 years ago when we lived near Traverse City up in northern Michigan. That far north, morel mushrooms — often the smaller, black variety — don't appear until May, when it is usually still cold enough for morning frosts. Even so, we would bundle up in our coats and, with onion sacks in hand, stalk around in the chilly, wet air gathering morels by the bagful.

Surprisingly, morel mushrooms grow in every state of the union, including Hawaii, where in early autumn



Laura Hunt Angel, The Messenger

An assortment of back yard wild plants, including asparagus, wild garlic and dandelion greens, are pictured.



Laura Hunt Angel, The Messenger

Luxurious mushrooms in cream sauce add a touch of class to ordinary roast pork.



Anthoni Goodman, Arizona Mushroom Club

A large flush of morel mushrooms that rose from the ashes of a fire in the White Mountains of Arizona are shown

it's possible to harvest them along the highest mountain peaks where some snow falls. Alaska's season begins in June.

Even desert states like Arizona produce a bounty of edible wild plants. Last year's fire in the White Mountains prompted a bumper crop of so-called "fire" morels for foragers like Anthoni Goodman of the Arizona Mushroom Club. Arizona is one of the few places where, depending on the amount of rain, you can find morel mushrooms any time of year.

Eating Wild In Kentucky

Here in western Kentucky, the procession of wild plants is beginning right now with wild greens, asparagus and spring time mushrooms. The length and timing of each season largely depends on the weather, with dryer springs usually resulting in fewer wild plants.

Poke, wild garlic and other greens are easy to gather from your own yard or in recently disturbed earth such as an old garden bed. For spring time mushrooms, you'll most likely want to head to the woods.

In these parts, white morels, which can grow to enormous size, are more common than the smaller black variety, making it easy to fill up a sack from just a patch or two. Placing them in a netted onion or potato bag will enable you to help spread the mushroom spores, which can drift out through the holes in the netting as you walk through the woods.

According to the experts, the trees that morels grow best around are white ash, tulip and dead elms. Old, abandoned apple orchards and areas that have experienced recent fires, floods or logging are also excellent places to look.

A Note of Caution

In 2006, three members of an Oregon family thought that they were gathering wild straw mushrooms, but were in fact poisonous lookalikes. Their mistake resulted in the death of one, with the other two requiring liver transplants. If you don't know much about wild plants, especially onions and mushrooms, find a local expert (aka Grandma, a experienced farmer or the county extension office) to check out your finds and show you how to prepare them. Never trust a simple online photo or book as your complete guide to what is safe, as there are often subtle differences that don't often show in a photo or drawing. True experts know that by making oneself as familiar as possible with the genuine article, it is easier to spot a counterfeit.

When heading to the woods, tall boots will help guard against the occasional angry spring serpent, and applying a good dose of tick and chigger repellent is wise. If you go foraging on public land, you may also need a permit, which can be easily obtained at several locations including the local Wal-Mart. Finally, take care to minimize your impact on the woods by not leaving trash or cigarette butts behind, or intentionally wreaking havoc on trees, plants or animals.

The Recipes

The best advice for preparing spring wild foods is to keep it simple. Drizzle asparagus with olive oil, garlic salt, a squeeze of lemon and

grill. An easy and delicious way to serve wild mushrooms is sauteed in butter with a dash of salt and black pepper until golden. If, however, you have been unusually blessed with a bounty of wild foods, try one of these flavorful ideas, or you can freeze or dry them for later use.

Classic Mushrooms in Cream Sauce

This sauce is traditionally served on toast, but is equally delicious over pasta, on grilled meats, or as a base for stroganoff. If wild mushrooms are in short supply, you can always use store bought portobellos or even ordinary button mushrooms.

3 tablespoons butter
1 shallot, minced
1 clove garlic, minced
2 pounds fresh morels
¾ cup chicken, beef or vegetable stock
1 cup heavy cream
Salt and pepper to taste

In a skillet, heat butter over medium heat. Add the shallots and garlic and saute until soft but not browned. Add the mushrooms and saute, stirring frequently until they begin to brown, about 5 minutes. Add the stock and heat through, then add the cream. Reduce heat and simmer until the sauce has reduced somewhat and thickened. Makes 4 hearty servings.

Spring Asparagus and Morels

Serve this up with some fresh caught fish and have an outdoors feast to remember.

3 tablespoons butter
1 clove garlic, minced
1 pound fresh morels, large ones halved
1 lb fresh asparagus, cut into 2" sticks
Salt and pepper to taste
Juice from half a lemon

Melt the butter in a large skillet and add the garlic and morels. Saute until the morels are tender, then add the asparagus and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until the morels and asparagus begun to brown. Remove from heat, add salt and pepper to taste, spritz with lemon juice and lightly toss. Serve immediately. 4 servings.

Wild Garlic Pesto

Fabulous with crusty bread or over pasta.

¼ cup Parmesan cheese
¼ cup pine nuts
½ cup wild garlic scapes (the green tops)
¾ cup quality olive oil
Juice from 1 lemon
Salt and pepper to taste

In a food processor or blender, pulse the cheese, pine nuts and garlic two or three times; do not pulverize the pine nuts. With the processor on, slowly add the olive oil and continue blending until the mixture thickens. Add the lemon juice and pulse once or twice just to blend. Store for up to a week in the fridge.