Day Three: Licorice Ferns and Earthly Kindness

Contributed by Rebecca "Wild Girl" Lerner
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Wild plants are compelling because they hint at an alternative reality where food and medicine are free, given by the Earth in an incredible act of generosity and compassion, like a parent for a child.

Inside every heart is a memory of another way. Advertisers have noticed that consumers long for a connection to nature, which is why so many commercials now play up products as "natural" and "green."
But since western culture dictates that we meet our fundamental needs by using money to purchase goods manufactured by other people, everything we use to live is created and packaged in mysterious places we never see. Everything comes from the system and it is almost inconceivable to imagine that beneath this convoluted matrix is an an incredible truth: There was once a time when we were fed, healed and clothed by the Earth alone. Every weed is a link to that secret world. Foraging is a means to experience it right now.

My stomach is full and I am eating without using cash. It isn't exactly "free" food, however. There is a price in terms of time and labor in locating, gathering and processing wild edibles. And more importantly, there is a cost to nature. I advocate foraging on a small scale, but I would hate to encourage over-harvesting, as that could threaten the food supply of wild animals and exacerbate the core problem of excess that got us into the ecological debacle we're dealing with now. In an ideal world, we would intentionally plant an abundance of fruit and nut trees all over the streets and public lands, making local and nutritious food available for everyone.

I feel great, as if I'm eating gourmet. Breakfast was acorn pancakes infused with wild-ginger leaf tea; lunch was figs and prunes with
dandelion-root coffee; and dinner was an attempt at a D.I.Y. "hot pocket" made out of chestnut flour with nettle greens and chanterelle mushrooms inside. To prepare the chestnut flour, I baked the nuts in the oven at 300 degrees for 45 minutes and then shelled them, chopped them up using my favorite primitive method -- the rock and block, as I call it -- as well as a knife, and put them in a coffee grinder.

For dessert, I chewed the sugary rhizomes of a licorice fern I found growing atop moss on a log at a wilderness area in Portland earlier today. A rhizome is a horizontally growing underground stem from which several stalks spring. Licorice fern rhizomes can be chewed like gum when raw, steamed or boiled. They are used medicinally to treat a cold or sore throat. You can find them in the Pacific Northwest in lowlands on mossy rocks, tree trunks and downed logs west of the Cascade mountains. You can identify them by their habit of being just 20 to 30 cm in length and having two rows of orange dots on the underside of their fronds, which are clusters of spores they use for reproduction.

If you're interested in harvesting chestnuts, you will want to know the difference between the good kind and the similar-looking but poisonous horse chestnuts. The nuts look alike so the best way to tell them apart is by looking at the husks that sheath them. The edible chestnuts are covered in tons of flexible little spines, giving them an uncanny resemblance to a Koosh ball. The horse chestnuts, in contrast, have separated spines, like this guy's gelled hairstyle. To extract the chestnuts from their prickly casings without getting hurt, step on them with your shoe and drag until the nut pops out.

When I set out to do this second Wild Food Week, I knew I had to stock up on out-of-season edibles in advance. I had been storing some myself, but I didn't want to end up with too little. So I offered to barter with friends in case someone had any extra wild food I wasn't able to gather myself. I suggested that I could trade some mugwort, which is a tall herb that promotes lucid dreaming. To my surprise, not one person wanted to barter. Instead, everyone who helped me chose to give their time and their edibles as gifts. They wanted to give selflessly out of kindness, just like Earth does.

Stay tuned: On Day Four I'll write about two common edible plants: dock and sumac. We'll be harvesting wapato in wet suits on camera on Day Five, looking for mushrooms on Day Six and preparing a wild Thanksgiving with my tribe on Day Seven.

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Do you have a suggestion, feedback or advice? She loves to get e-mails from Culture Change readers at RebeccaELerner@gmail.com

TV coverage in Portland of Rebecca's wild diet:

koinlocal6.com

The Portland Oregonian, largest daily newspaper in Oregon: