Week of Wild Food - Day Five

Contributed by Becky Lerner
28 May 2009

An early end for the project, and some reflections

I wanted this to last seven days, but I hit my limit today and had to end the project early. All the foraging experts told me in advance that the last week of May would be a pretty much impossible time of year to eat only fresh wild edibles because it's an in between time -- a time after the spring mushrooms but before the summer fruits and berries -- so there are few calories available besides meat or fish, and even those are not necessarily easy to come by without much skill and knowledge. Now I can tell you from first-hand experience that they are absolutely correct about that.

I ended up fasting except for herbal teas and root foods, and it turns out the roots were mainly diuretics, liver tonics and laxatives, so I was doing a real number on my body. Survival projects like this can be incredibly educational but are rarely much fun, because they push you to the limits of what you can endure.

Before this project began, I viewed foraging as a really fun way to get outside and appreciate the land around me. It allowed me to see the world in a totally different way. I started preferring unkempt lawns and less affluent areas of the city because they offered more weeds and more wild plant diversity. I liked tasting new foods and thinking about how they could compliment conventional recipes. I think that's the best way to go about introducing yourself to the wild -- a little bit at a time, gradually, and as a fun addition to your regular diet. It is fascinating to discover that most of the weeds on your street are actually ancient foods with medicinal or deeply nutritious properties that are absent from conventionally farmed foods.

So, why did I end the project early? This morning I woke up feeling awful. I could barely walk without seeing spots and holding onto a wall. My muscles felt weak and achy, and my emotional state was really bad. I found myself hungry and angry and sobbing out of frustration. I knew that I had tried all the major plant food sources in the area and that I did not have the energy to go out again today to try and find any more. I did hear about a fishing spot for bass, but it required driving 30 minutes, and I was in no condition to be behind the wheel. I also heard of someone who knows how to trap an aquatic rodent called a nutria around here, but he was out of town. And the person with the acorns did not get back in touch with me, either. Today was looking bleak, and so my choice was either to fast for two more days or to stop now and reflect. I decided that the emotional toll of prolonged fasting would be counterproductive, because it would only leave me increasingly miserable and resentful. It's one thing to fast a few days while you're at a meditation retreat, and another to be fasting while stressed out about trying to find food. I had reached my limit.

If I were to do this project over, knowing what I know now, I would either pick a different time of year or have stored food from other seasons and focused on scavenging roadkill, fishing, and maybe hunting squirrels. I might still eat some of the same wild foods I ate this time -- especially the ones I included in those wonderful teas -- but they would be in combination with the other ones. I would also have scouted out the area in advance so I knew where everything would be. I made the mistake this time of thinking that the wild foods I had eaten in the weeks leading up to the survival challenge would still be available. I didn't realize that food you can find in the second week of May is no longer an option in the fourth.

I would love to try doing this again in the late summer or early fall when the best tasting fruits, berries and nuts and salmon and mushrooms are abundant in Oregon. I would do it with a tribe of friends and I would sleep outdoors in the wilderness instead of in the city. That would make it much more fun and much more doable -- the benefits of community, of having other knowledgeable people working together to help each other, cannot be understated. While one person

might spend four hours looking for and gathering burdock root, for instance, three others can use that same time to go out and get three other kinds of foods in three other places. Together we can do so much more than one person can accomplish alone. The opportunity to share our knowledge and barter or share goods are also huge benefits. Maybe you didn't save enough acorns last fall, but your neighbor has more than she needs. Maybe you don't know where to go to catch bass, but your friend does. When it comes to naturalist skills, there is an overwhelming amount of information to grasp. As my botanist friend Jordan Fink put it, "Some of us have been doing this stuff for 10 years, but we're all beginners. Unless you were raised with ecosystems and plant knowledge, ecology is always going to be a second language. I might be fluent, but I'm always going to have an accent. I'm not going to know the deep patterns." That's good news, too -- it means you don't have to know everything to survive. You just need a community of people who are all in it together.

I'm going to continue writing about wild food for the next two days, I just will also be eating regular food too. That's really the best way to learn -- when you're not under pressure. I encourage anyone who has been reading this to go out and try foraging for something you'll really enjoy, whether that is a morel mushroom or a sun-ripened blackberry or an apple from a tree. Write down where you found it. Take pictures. Go back next season, or in a few weeks, and see what you find. Look at the weeds outside your door and think about letting your lawn go a little wild. More than anything, have fun. Get out there and be free.

If you'd like to stay with me as the seasons change and I continue to write about and photograph the wild foods I enjoy, please visit my wilderness skills blog, First Ways. And as always, I love to hear from readers at RebeccaELerner@gmail.com

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