

Day Four: On Sumac tea, conserving calories, and preparing for collapse

Contributed by "Wild Girl" Rebecca Lerner
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Sumac is a big shrub or a tall tree, depending on your view, that grows all over the United States, Europe and the Middle East. I have seen it along roadsides, in drainage ditches and as an ornamental plant in front yards. The dark red-purple berries form a distinctive cluster the size of a fist at the ends of the branches. The berry clusters are dense and fuzzy with a texture that reminds me of a carpet. They can be boiled to make tea or left to sit in cold water to make a refreshing beverage reminiscent of lemonade. Like citrus fruits, sumac is very high in Vitamin C. The flavor is very tart, however, and would be much improved with a sweetener. As long as you're looking for the distinctive berry clusters, you do not need to worry about confusing this plant with poison sumac. Poison sumac has ivory-white berries that look very different.

If there are no berries, however, you will want to be cautious, because touching poison sumac will cause a nasty rash reported to be much worse than poison ivy. Additionally, anyone who is allergic to cashews or mangoes will want to avoid even the edible sumac, according to Samuel Thayer's book "The Forager's Harvest."

I am sipping sumac tea as I write this. Earlier today I ate acorn pancakes with chopped walnuts, baked fig chips, feral prunes, and a soup made of stinging nettle broth and mushrooms. I attempted to add yellow dock seeds to the acorn flour to make crackers, as per a friend's recipe, but I could not figure out how to separate the tiny seeds from their chaff. I tried an herb grinder, and that didn't work. If anyone who is reading this knows from firsthand experience, please e-mail me and tell me how. Yellow dock is a common weed that sends up a distinctive stalk filled with dark brown seeds in autumn. Young leaves of yellow dock are abundant in the springtime and are also edible, though bitter. The plant is high in iron and is used medicinally as a blood and liver purifier. Eating yellow dock roots is said to help the body eliminate heavy metals.

The lessons I learned from the May experiment have served me well, and I have no doubt that I will make it to Day Seven with ease. I scouted my neighborhood in advance, so I don't have much wandering to do. I also gathered as much as I could when it became seasonally available, like the squirrels do. So it has been easy for me to lay low and conserve energy. I am also doing the opposite all of the things I usually do to stay fit: I have been eating carbohydrates right before bed, I have not been jogging in the morning, and I aim to be as inactive as possible. Viewed in this light, laziness is just another word for efficiency. Anyone who has labored in farm work understands how efficient foraging can be. Assuming you've scouted your neighborhood, all you have to do is gather and process the plants you want to eat. You don't have to plant them, transfer them, weed them, water them or cultivate them in any other way.

This diet doesn't taste as good as it would if I could add salt, honey, oil, garlic or other seasonings. It's also about half the quantity of food I usually eat, if not less, and there's little to no protein besides what's in the nuts. But my stomach has shrunk enough that I don't feel hungry, and I am eating healthy gourmet food. Delicacies, you could even say. Chestnut flour goes for \$12 a pound in the market. Acorn flour is so rare I doubt anyone even sells it.

In general I have been sleeping well and feeling energized. Since it is already Day 4 and I'm feeling great, I decided it was alright to go to the gym today and work out. I hope that doesn't backfire tomorrow. This Wild Food Challenge has melted off a couple pounds of body weight, judging by my appearance, but it has been mostly muscle mass. I assume that is due to both lack of overall calories and dearth specifically of protein. I wish I had some salmon, but I didn't fish. I don't feel all that deprived, though my mouth waters at the thought of an omelette and home fries. Or a veggie burger. Or Thai food. Or a burrito. But I digress.

Foraging is one of many tools we may need in order to survive the potential collapse of western civilization. I say "potential" because I am an optimist. There is no question that the conventional way of living in the 21st Century has an expiration date, but the question is whether we will build the framework for what succeeds it in advance of collapse. If so, we will thrive. If not, we will be in apocalypse mode. There are many reasons to be hopeful. But just in case you don't want to rely on hoping alone, I encourage you to run your own survival experiment. Learn what plants you have around you. Discover the foods you can eat without the grocery store. Maybe even consider making medicines. Read about the indigenous people who lived in your area. Find out how they did it, and use their stories to inspire your own abilities.

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: