

Edible and Natural: How Do I Know What's Safe to Eat?

By JJ Murphy

I am prone to allergic reactions, so I do not take this subject lightly. Over the years, I have thrown away perfectly edible food if I have a shadow of a doubt. I've also listened to the cautionary tales told by my teachers and mentors. Most mistakes are made by experienced foragers, who skip a step in the detail-oriented task of wild edible identification.

How do I know what to put in my mouth?

This is one area where self-instruction is counterproductive. When you find reputable teachers and organizations, authors who have had their facts checked and re-checked before publication — this goes for online sources as well as print field guides — and attend professional gatherings, you eliminate a lot of guesswork. I joined my local area mycology association in 2007 able to identify two mushrooms. I've lost count of how many mushrooms I can now identify accurately and reliably.

Learn to use all your senses. It's the most important skill you can develop. Combined with a dose of respect, knowledge replaces fear. I cannot think of a better way to spend my time outdoors than foraging while hiking. I have become quite dependent on my digital camera and my pocket notebook, which often doubles as a measuring tool.

I study my field guides before I hit the trail. I don't carry books on a hike, but I do carry an ample supply of paper bags or wax bags to collect mushrooms and plants. Typically, I will have to bring my wild specimens home to complete the positive identification.

Here are a few things to keep in mind while in the field:

1. There are fewer poisonous species than non-poisonous species. If you learn all the poisonous plants and fungi typical of your local area, when you



Chicken mushroom.

Photo by JJ Murphy

find a plant you don't know, it's more likely to be non-poisonous.

2. Observe carefully. Chicken mushroom has no poisonous look-alike, but there's more to identifying it than finding an orange shelf mushroom. You have to notice the *pores* on the underside. The poisonous Jack-o-lantern mushroom has *gills* on its underside.

3. Harvest common plants where they grow in abundance, but never take more than 10 percent. Overharvesting is destructive to the environment and may deprive wild birds and mammals of their only source of essential nutrition.

4. Learn which plants are endangered and refrain from harvesting them at all.

5. Spend time learning to identify every plant during each season. Look at the new growth of spring; notice the changes in summer and autumn, and any skeletal remains in winter.

6. Make sure you harvest from healthy areas. In addition to foraging more than 50 feet from regularly traveled roads, look at the condition of the entire habitat. If the leaves are not a healthy color green, if the water is not running clear, if there is a lot of animal scat or carrion, find another place to forage. Mushrooms, on the other hand can be decomposers, so some very edible species may be growing on or in decaying matter. But I still would not harvest them in an area that was otherwise unhealthy.

7. I prefer to keep each species I gather in a separate paper or waxed paper bag, to ensure I have accurate field samples when I get home.

8. While in the field, I look at the native habitat. It really matters if a mushroom is growing on the ground or on wood and if it changes color when you bruise or cut it. Likewise, it really matters if a plant grows in a cluster, if the stem is smooth or pubescent, or if its leaves are compound. You get the idea.

9. I also notice if I have a reaction to the plant or fungus when I touch it, if it has a distinct odor or any other sensory information evident when I first harvest it.

Once home, I study my samples and use the following steps for identification:

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Greenman

By Eric Stewart

Bedtime for the Garden

Now that autumn is here, it's time to give your garden that last little push prior to putting it to bed for winter. And, for die-hard gardeners like myself, there are plenty of rewarding tasks to do before the snow starts to fly.

Adding late season color

One of the easiest ways to squeeze out a few extra weeks of bloom is to plant some late season flowers. Of course, the most obvious of these are the ubiquitous, showy mounds of color provided by mums and asters. Though both are perennials (at least in general terms), I usually treat them as annuals for use in containers and for plugging gaps in gardens and borders. As perennials, these garden stalwarts can handle frosts, but often look fairly ratty by the time their blooms have faded. If one intends to treat them as true perennials in the garden, please note that the 10-inch tall aster you purchase in the fall can morph into an enormous plant the following year. As for the mums, they too can come back far larger than expected, and should also be pinched back once or twice during the following growing season to prevent them from blooming too early or from becoming too leggy.

Another widely available late season bloomer is the pansy. Low growing, showy and a bit whimsical, pansies are available in the some of season's most bewitching colors including orange, purple, burgundy and even black. Indeed, Monet was mad for black pansies and planted great swathes of them in his gardens at Giverny.

Of course, one can also add a splash of seasonal color by strategically placing displays of pumpkins, gourds, millet and corn stalks about the garden. Be warned, however, that this can have surprising and/or unpleasant consequences in areas known to be frequented by bear. One year, I gave some clients quite a scare by covering their deck with lavish groupings of these seasonal goodies — only to receive a frantic call one morn-



Now is the time to plant bulbs for spring color.

Photo by Eric Stewart

ing requesting that I haul it all away after an unexpected ursine visitor was spotted feasting on my efforts the night before.

Garden Cleanup Dos and Don'ts

I am very busy this time of year doing clean-ups for my clients; however, a fall clean-up does not necessarily mean that the garden should resemble a moonscape afterwards. I often choose to leave standing certain perennials and grasses that provide visual interest and food for wildlife. Among the perennials included in my list of plants to leave standing for their interesting seed heads are Echinacea (Cone Flower), Rudbeckia (Black-eyed Susan) and Sedums such as 'Autumn Joy.' Also, I always leave decorative grasses standing. These will turn lovely shades of gold and russet, providing color, movement, and even a musical rustling sound throughout the winter.

During my clean-ups, I always rip out spent annuals and cut down any perennials that look shabby. Most

of these go into the compost pile; however, do not add any plant material to your compost pile (at least if you intend to use the compost) that is diseased. Fall is also an ideal time to do any needed trimming or pruning, as the branch structure of trees and shrubs is most evident after the leaf fall. Do not, however, trim forsythia or other spring-blooming shrubs at this time (except for damaged or dead branches) as you will be removing the spring blooms. This is also not the right time to shape boxwoods or other dense shrubs in hedges as this might encourage late season growth that will only be killed by the coming frosts.

On leaves and mulch

After the garden is tidied up, now is an excellent time to add a layer of mulch. Indeed, it seldom is a bad time to add mulch, as it provides so many benefits. During the

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Bruce Littlefield's Dinner Party Talk

Serving up a weekly plateful of conversation

Election chatter. Some quotes I can't shake from this year's election. Hilarious? Offensive? Ignorant? Yes, yes, yes. "They [Republicans] say, 'You're too conservative.' Was Thomas Jefferson too conservative? I'm tired of some people calling me wacky." — Nevada Tea Party loser *Sharron Angle*



"I don't think you can buy elections." — bigger loser, California Republican gubernatorial candidate and former eBay CEO *Meg Whitman*, who spent more than \$140 million of her own money to run against Jerry Brown
 "There is nothing to be proud of in being a dysfunctional homosexual. That's not how God created us." — *Carl Paladino*, biggest loser, New York State candidate for Governor

E.T. phone Denver. Denver voters decided not to establish an Extraterrestrial Affairs Commission. But I'm sure aliens have made a note that Denver is interested in "potential encounters or interactions with extraterrestrial intelligent beings or their vehicles." Hey, since *Pine Bush* is the alien hot spot of the northeast, might I suggest a commission?

Up in smoke. California's closely watched Proposition 19 to legalize recreational marijuana cultivation and use was rejected by voters. Stoners took a toke and said, "That blows, dude." By the way, *Bill Clinton* still says he never inhaled.

Rally tally. Many people from our area bused down to the National Mall to participate in *Jon Stewart* and *Stephen Colbert's* "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear." I asked Kerhonksonite *Karen Williams* to look out for the best signs. Top 3: "It's a sad day when our politicians are comical, and I have to take our comedians seriously." "My wife thinks I'm walking the Appalachian Trail." And "3 words that will save the economy: gay bridal registry." Stephen Colbert estimated the crowd at 6 billion.

Made in China. This week *Citizens Against Government Waste* released an ad set in 2030 that depicts a Chinese professor lecturing to students on why America collapsed. The reasons: stimulus spending, health care policy, government intervention into private industry, high taxation and government debt. I must admit it's haunting when the professor ends his lecture with "Now they work for us," and the students laugh. And laugh. Several networks, including ABC, have banned the ad.

Heartburn. After a 16-year hiatus (with a brief cameo in 2006) the McDonald's *McRib* sandwich officially returned this week to all 14,000 McDonald's locations. But hurry if you want a bite of ground pork molded into the shape of a small slab of ribs—it's only available for four weeks. McRib fans are activists. There is an online "McRib Locator" where people can post sightings of the elusive sandwich and it has its own *Facebook* page.

Speaking of fast food, a couple in Hong Kong recently got married in a McDonald's. Unfortunately, Mickey D's doesn't have an alcohol license, so no champagne was served. This is almost as good (strange? sad?) as the *Wal-Mart* wedding that took place about a month ago. Wedding portraits, eye exams and lower prices included.

Speaking of weddings, congratulations to *Peter del Rio* and *Elaine Young* on their recent marriage. Their nuptials at Christ the King Episcopal and reception at their Marbletown farm were lovely. My favorite moment was when the crowd fell silent for *Rev. Alison Quin's* prayer and the little two year old in front of me yelled, "YAY!"

Speaking of youngins, here's a tragic tale. A 10-year-old girl has given birth in Southern Spain. The father of the child is (fortunately?!) also a minor, so Spanish authorities are deciding whether to let her and her family keep the baby. On a programming note, *MTV* has already sent camera crews to Spain for their new series, *My 10 Year Old Mommy*.

Sports scoreboard. The *Dallas Cowboys* lost Sunday to the *Jaguars*. Replacement QB *Jon Kitna* threw a few nice passes, one of which bounced gracefully off tight end *Jason Witten's* helmet. *Vikings* head coach *Brad Childress* has confirmed the team will bid farewell to *Randy Moss*. In other news, more people watched the *Saints-Steelers* game Sunday night than the *MLB World Series*. By the way, did you even know the World Series was on? What a snooze.

One more for the road. Did you know more than 2,420,000 people die each year in America. Around 40% of these are sudden. So 2,600 Americans woke up yesterday expecting to live for a long time. And today they keeled over. So, um, live right and enjoy your day.

Now, eat your dinner!

Rondout Valley resident Bruce Littlefield is a best-selling author and American culture expert. He appears on the *Today Show*, *CBS Early Show*, and *The View*. Find fun everyday at brucelittlefield.com.

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1. If I have collected mushrooms, I make a spore print of each sample species. I will not eat the mushroom until I see the color of the spores. Brown paper bags show the widest range of spore print color. Acetate sheets also keep colors from blending in with the color of the paper.

2. I examine the basic parts of each species — root, stem, leaves, buds, flowers, fruit and seed for plants and for mushrooms, cap, underside, stem, mycelia, and spore print. Using my digital photos, I compare the photos, my samples and the field guide descriptions.

3. As I prepare to decide whether my wild harvest is edible, I also do the following: notice what happens when I touch it to my wrist. I've had rashes and itching manifest after one hour, but typically skin reactions will happen within 5-15 minutes.

4. Once I decide which part of the plant I want to eat, after I prepare it and before I serve it, I place a tiny bit on my outer lip. I eat nettles, which I cannot test raw, but I have tested cooked nettles this way.

5. If my lip is not burning or itching after 5-15 minutes, I place a tiny bit of the prepared food on my tongue. I cannot keep something in my mouth for 15 minutes, so I typically hold it in my mouth for a short time and spit it out and wait 15 minutes to see if I have an allergic reaction.

6. Next, I take a small bite, chew and spit it out right away to check for any discomfort in my mouth. Most food reactions happen when you swallow and the food enters your digestive system. By the time I've explored my wild harvest this far, I know if I want to eat it.

7. I make it a point to test only one new plant at a time. Once I learn a plant or fungus, I'll know if I can eat it or not. In the case of mushrooms, I make a spore print anyway, because renal failure is just not worth the risk. Some mushrooms are identical in every field feature except spore print color.

I've never understood why people fear wild foods, but not those found in their local markets. Even with cultivated plants, some people have allergies, while others do not. Then there is the issue of which part of the plant is edible. Many members of the nightshade family have toxic leaves and edible fruits.

Common sense and respect are critical to foraging. I've been foraging all my life and I still take classes with experts. I often learn something new about a plant I've been nibbling on since childhood. It's easy to become overconfident after foraging for a few years; it's not worth the risk to be less than 100 percent sure of your wild harvest.

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