

CHEROKEE ONE FEATHER

Getting' Wild: Ramps

March 26, 2013

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Ever think of ramps as a health food? A nutritional panel recently conducted revealed that ramps contain nearly as much Vitamin A as spinach, which aids in the health of the eye, and about the same amount of folate (or folic acid), which is important to decrease the risk of birth defects as well as aiding in heart and brain health. Ramps also contain respectable amounts of calcium, phosphorus, and Vitamin C. The Vitamin C content would have been especially important back in the day when folks ate a lot of stored food. Ramps were one of the first spring foods and the high Vitamin C content would have been welcomed in a diet of canned and dried foods. Vitamin C is important because it helps to keep cells healthy as well as aiding in immune function.

At right: Kevin Welch, of the Center for Cherokee Plants, demonstrates sustainable ramp harvesting the traditional Cherokee way by cutting above roots, leaving roots & the base of the ramp bulb in the ground.



(Photo by Sarah McClellan-Welch/EBCI Cooperative Extension)

Ramps are high in sulfur compounds, the chemicals which give them their distinctive smell and flavor. These are the same chemicals that give onions and garlic their punch. Ramps fall somewhere between the two on their potency due to the sulfur compounds; not as strong as garlic but stronger than onions. These compounds are known to fight cancer, but their reaction in the soil makes them stronger promoters of the immune system. The sulfur compounds found in ramps tend to help the plant concentrate selenium from the soil, which is naturally low in the Southern Appalachian Mountains. The element selenium is necessary for a strong immune system in humans. So, eating ramps could be said to help prevent sickness in two ways: one, by boosting your immune system, and two, eating enough ramps also keeps people away, thus avoiding any germs that might be going around.

Ramps have a broad range in eastern North America. They are found in the eastern half of Canada, as far west as the Dakotas and parts of Oklahoma, and south into Georgia

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and Alabama. The city Chicago is supposedly named after the Miami-Illinois word *shikaakwa*, which has been translated as “skunk place” due to the ramps that grew on the shoreline on Lake Michigan. The French pronounced it Checagou, which later became Chicago. Whether that is true or not, it makes a great story for ramp lovers. Here in the Southern Appalachians, ramps grow best in the high mountains on a north slope. So not only are they delicious and nutritious, the energy expended to gather the ramps is great exercise. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that adults get 2.5 hours of moderate physical activity, like hiking per week.

The latest rules for harvesting ramps from the National Forests (at least as of 2012) state that a harvester can get up to 5 pounds of ramps for personal consumption without a permit. For more than 5 pounds, commercial permit is needed which costs \$.50 a pound for a minimum of 40 pounds. The maximum amount allowed for harvest on a permit is 500 pounds and only half of the ramps in any area can be harvested. Harvesting without a permit can lead to fines.

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