

It's Salad Days for Weeds

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On a recent Saturday, Washington, D.C., interior designer Morigan Green stopped at a produce stand and picked up some dandelion greens. \$9 a pound? No problem. Says Mr. Green: "These are as good a yuppie green as you can get." Gardeners have long waged war against weeds but one organic weed expert cultivates them as a new form of delicacy. Anne-Marie Chaker reports.

As suburban homeowners commence their annual battle against weeds, more people are paying top dollar to eat them. The dandelion -- perhaps the most common weed of them all -- is seeing a huge surge in sales at grocery stores. Other long-scorned greens making the leap to the dinner table include purslane, lamb's quarters and stinging nettles, a skin-irritating plant that can be eaten safely after boiling.

U.S. supermarkets sold \$2 million of dandelion greens in the year that ended in March, a 9% increase over the year earlier, according to FreshLook Marketing, a Hoffman Estates, Ill.-based company that tracks grocery stores' sales of produce. While sales are still small, they're growing more than twice as fast as sales of vegetables overall. Grocery chain Wegmans Food Markets Inc. has seen a 25% increase in sales of dandelion greens for the year to date from the year-earlier period. Southern grocery chain Earth Fare Inc., based in Asheville, N.C., says it has seen a 40% increase in sales of dandelion greens for the year to date.

Greens "are trendy items," says Beth Eccles, owner of Green Acres Farm, in North Judson, Ind., which began harvesting and selling the wild purslane and lamb's quarters on its property about five years ago. Sales of the edible weeds, which sell for \$3 per six-ounce bunch, have been rising by 20% each year.

Led by chefs and gourmets in search of new and interesting flavors, Americans have been eating a greater variety of greens in recent years. Tastes have moved from familiar greens like arugula to progressively wilder, more obscure plants. The interest in weed cuisine also taps into the current movement toward organic and local foods; as lawn owners have long complained, weeds are hardy and require no pesticides and little water to thrive. When picked in the wild, weeds also offer frugal consumers the thrill of foraging.



Cinda Sebastian waters seedlings on her Westminster, Md., farm. She sells produce, including dandelion greens, at Washington, D.C., farmers' markets.

Bill Coleman, who runs Coleman Family Farms in Carpinteria, Calif., believes that in the recession, people are tightening their belts and savoring simple, old-fashioned cooking, rather than gourmet restaurant meals. "People are getting back to their grandparents' food," he says. This is an "especially good year" for edible weeds, whose sales have gone up by about 25% compared with last year, he says, and he has been raising more weeds such as dandelion, purslane and amaranth.

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Until the mid-20th century, greens such as wild onions, pokeweed and sorrel were eaten in many parts of the U.S. "The wild plants and the weeds were more commonly eaten until World War II, when they were seen more in disdain and processed foods began to move up," says James A. Duke, a former Agriculture Department researcher who has written a book on edible weeds.

As immigrants and rural Americans moved to cities and left behind both their gardens and their ethnic origins, they turned to grocery stores for food, says Usha Palaniswamy, a professor at Excelsior College, a distance-learning program based in Albany, N.Y. Immigrants began eating more of what was considered upscale -- for instance, iceberg lettuce instead of dark, leafy greens. "Eating a certain kind of food [was] considered affluent," says Ms. Palaniswamy, who has for years studied why plants eaten in many parts of the world are considered weeds in the U.S. One weed commonly eaten abroad is purslane, which is used in French and Middle Eastern cuisines.

Nowadays, of course, it is well-to-do consumers who are leading the way back to weed-eating. Health-food fans in particular have taken notice as dark, leafy greens have gained a reputation as superfoods. Weeds carry a complex "matrix" of plant compounds that are beneficial when consumed, says Dawn Jackson Blatner, a Chicago-based dietician and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. These plants "learned how to protect themselves from the sun, the wind, the bugs," and those who eat them "are reaping the benefits of that matrix of immune systems," she says. "One man's weed is another man's wonder food."

All this is good news for farmers, who are able to charge more for the former weeds. Farmer Cinda Sebastian, who sells dandelion to customers such as Mr. Green, says "there are a whole lot of cool, indigenous greens" that she doesn't even have to cultivate on her Westminster, Md., farm -- though she spends hours every week picking them -- and she sells them at the same price as her fancier greens, such as tatsoi.

Another way to get weeds: Organic-gardening experts advocate foraging near your home. A tip sheet by the Montgomery County, Md., Department of Environmental Protection recommends that homeowners "make a salad" with such hand-pickable weeds as dandelion and wild garlic and onions.

But before running out to pick weeds, keep in mind that wild plants are not always safe to eat. Some guidelines:

Take care to identify the plants. "Don't go on your first foraging hunt alone," says Dr. Duke. Some edible weeds could easily be confused with toxic or poisonous ones. For instance, wild carrot could be confused with the poisonous hemlock.

Just because one part of a plant is edible doesn't necessarily mean the whole plant is. For instance, the root of the potato can be eaten, but the leaves and the berries are poisonous.

Cook carefully. Some plants need to be cooked thoroughly to prevent toxicity. Pokeweed, for example, can be dangerous. It needs to be cooked well, with the water it's boiled in thrown out and replaced at least twice.

The Next Arugula?

Here are some plants commonly considered weeds that are making the leap to the dinner table.

Scientific Name	Common Name	Appearance/ Distribution	How to Eat
Arctium minus	Burdock	Big, coarse plant that can grow up to six feet tall with hollow stems and large, toothed leaves. Commonly found in many parts of the country, particularly in fields and abandoned areas.	Useful in soups and stews, the stalk is similar in taste and appearance to celery.
Stellaria media	Chickweed	Low, mat-forming plant producing clusters of small white flowers at the tip of its long, slender stems. Frequently found in lawns.	Mild flavored, can be used in salads.
1. Taraxacum officinale	Dandelion	Long, toothed leaves form a circle around the base of stems, which produce an unmistakable yellow flower.	Bitter greens can be used in salads or cooked.
Pueraria lobata	Kudzu	Persistent, fast-climbing vine common in the South.	The leaves can be battered and fried. In Asia, the roots are commonly converted to flour.
2. Chenopodium album	Lamb's quarters	Triangular leaf, with a grayish cast when the plant is young. Common in suburban lawns.	The leaves can be cooked as an alternative to spinach, which belongs to the same plant family.
3. Phytolacca americana	Pokeweed	Hollow-stemmed perennial grows up to nine feet long with characteristic clusters of purplish-black berries. Common at roadsides and abandoned areas.	Eat with caution if at all. The new leaf shoots must be boiled with at least two changes of water. Even then, some have reported illness.
4. Portulaca oleracea	Purslane	A hot-weather succulent, common in lawns, gardens and fields.	Leaves, stems and flowers may be stewed or eaten raw. Succulent stems can be pickled. Ashes of burned purslane can even be used as a salt substitute.
Capsella bursa-pastoris	Shepherd's purse	Rosette of toothed leaves at the base of long, slim stems.	A member of the mustard family, the leaves offer a peppery kick to salads, or can be added to a cooked 'mess of greens.'

Source: Duke, J.A. CRC Handbook of Edible Weeds, CRC Press Inc. 1992.