

■ IN THE KNOW

# A taste *of the wild*

Forager turns modern foodies into hunter-gatherers

By M.G. Marshall

Photography by Terry Manzo

**A**s we step, one-by-one, over the shaky stile that straddles a farmer's fence, we balance a curious assortment of gear – spades large and small, children's plastic pails and numerous empty sacks for bagging our quarry.

We are hunting for food, wild food as it has come to be called. That doesn't mean animals, as you might think, but plants, edible plants, the kind that grow naturally in the meadows and woods of rural Ontario.

On this grey spring morning, near Stratford, we're looking for those specimens that must be harvested soon; the window for picking and eating them is short. We're confident we will find them here, along the Avon trail, because our guide, Peter Blush, has been scouring this area for years, honing his intimate knowledge of what grows where, and selling his sought-after bounty to Stratford's best markets and restaurants. Accompanying him is Phil Phillips, an organic farmer and chef. He too is a member in good standing of Stratford's thriving culinary scene; today he's come along to give us advice about cooking.

We enter the trail through a forest of maple and

beech, skirt an abandoned orchard, and cross a meadow. Long-neglected grain crops lie flat beneath our feet. Just beside us, a wood duck on her nest is startled into flight. Under a mat of criss-crossed yellow grass we see a dozen perfect eggs.

Back in the woods, trilliums bloom on the damp forest floor in irregular patches of white. We follow the banks of a furiously racing stream, stepping over its tributaries.

Blush points out some trout lilies, small, unremarkable plants whose tiny oval leaves stand upright on their ends.

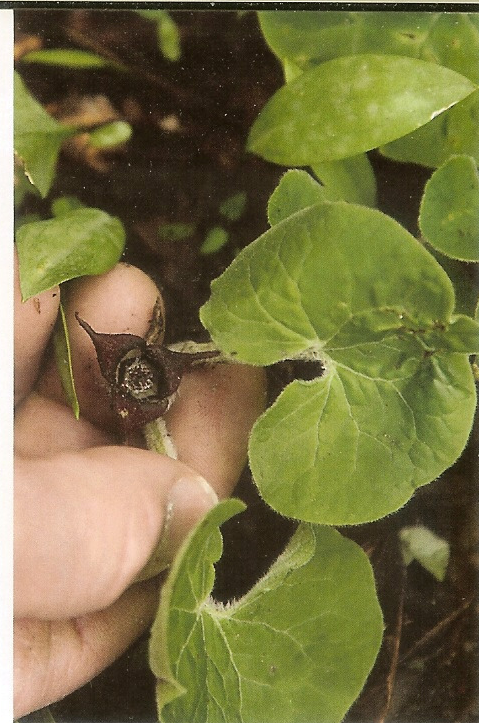
In a week or so the trout lilies will flower with a drooping yellow bloom that resembles columbine. The leaves will turn bitter then, Blush tells us; now is the time to pick them. They can be eaten raw and so we taste them. They're pleasantly peppery but gathering enough for a serving would take 20 minutes at least. Searching for wild ingredients is a lot more work than picking up a package of greens at Zehrs.

Long before there were supermarkets, and before there were cultivated crops, our hunting and gathering ancestors knew how to forage for food. With sometimes deadly consequences, they figured out how to >>

This bag full of wild leeks will be prized for their leaves as well as their bulbs.



Peter Blush leads a foraging expedition through the woods near Stratford. The group learned about plants that are edible as well as how to collect plants while also respecting nature. Among the plants spotted by Blush are the young wild ginger plants above right with their pretty purple flower. The root is edible and can be used like domestic ginger.



>>distinguish the useful from the harmful, the bitter from the sweet, and how to make an otherwise troublesome plant digestible, even delicious, by cooking.

Over the centuries, their hard-won expertise was gradually made irrelevant by advances in farming. How much easier it became to plant and harvest predictable crops than scrounge for elusive plants. And after the Second World War, the introduction of chemical fertilizers and huge economies of scale made food more plentiful and affordable than ever. Foraging was soon regarded as a perverse pursuit of the poor.

How then to explain, a half-century later, our happy expedition near Stratford? And the growing presence of foraged foods on the menus of celebrity chefs and the shelves of specialty grocers across North America?

Food industry watchers speculate our increasing disillusionment with mass-produced fare has created a craving for purity. A plant plucked from the woods or the banks of a stream is unlikely to have been touched by pesticides or sullied by commercial cross-breeding.

It's easy to imagine that it looks and tastes just the way it did when our great-great-grandparents put it in their mouths generations ago.

And what seems more authentic than taking the time from our fractured lives to do exactly as they did, search out and pick the plant ourselves, then take the time to

## FORAGING FOR FORAGERS

- For more information on Peter Blush, check: [www.pucksplenty.com](http://www.pucksplenty.com)
- Alexis Burnett runs Earth Tracks, based in Durham, Ont. It offers everything from wilderness canoeing to foraging trips, mostly in Wellington, Dufferin and Grey Counties from May until October. [www.earthtracks.ca](http://www.earthtracks.ca)
- The Mycological Society of Toronto conducts seasonal mushroom foraging trips, some of them west of Toronto. [www.mycor.org](http://www.mycor.org)
- Local Enhancement & Appreciation of Forests (LEAF) conducts seasonal edible tree tours in Toronto. [www.yourleaf.org](http://www.yourleaf.org) > events





Peter Blush

prepare it? Maybe foraging is a balm for the rootlessness of modern existence.

At the edge of a meadow, Blush bends to pick the top few leaves from some densely packed plants resembling mint. These are stinging nettles. He warns us to put on gloves before we touch them; tiny hairs on their leaves and stems will burn the skin and cause a rash.

And nettles, he says, are one of the plants our foraging forebears learned never to eat raw: those spiky hairs will set the throat on fire and the stomach to sure rebellion. Once cooked, however, nettles are one of nature's most nutritious greens, packed with vitamins and protein. If the leaves are picked before the flower appears, nettles taste like a wilder, richer spinach.

Phillips, our helpful chef, suggests we use them to make a Swedish nettle soup,

a French pistou or a nettle pesto. But be careful not to handle them when you cook them. Use tongs.

## PHIL'S STINGING NETTLE PESTO

(Courtesy of Phil Phillips)

*Combine, in stages, the following ingredients in a mortar and pestle :*

- 2 tablespoons (30 ml) toasted black walnuts
  - 1 cup (250 ml) chopped wild leek greens
  - 6 to 8 tablespoons (90 to 120 ml) blanched and chopped young nettle leaves with the water squeezed out
  - 2 tablespoons (30 ml) freshly grated Parmigiano reggiano.
- Mash everything together, stirring with the pestle, until it is a uniform consistency. Start adding extra virgin olive oil mixed with a little cider vinegar, a tablespoon at a time:
- 2 tablespoons (30 ml) if you are making a spread
  - 4 tablespoons (60 ml) if you are making a pasta sauce.

**1.** Pound and stir until the olive oil and vinegar are evenly absorbed.

**2.** Add sea salt to taste. Taste and add oil and/or vinegar as required.

**Note:** If foraged ingredients are not available, substitute spinach for the nettles and green onions for the wild leeks. Regular walnuts can be used instead of black walnuts.

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Back in the forest, Blush is searching for the tell-tale signs of a plant that lures more foragers to the woods than any other — wild leeks, also known as ramps. This is their high season. He's sure we will find some.

At the top of a rise, he points to a large bed of leaves lying flat on the ground; they look like a cross between tulips and lily of the valley.

Hundreds of plants are clustered together, a sea of inviting light green. We wade in >>

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Peter Blush holds a bouquet of wild leeks.

>>with our shovels. Within each patch we dig up just a few from the centre, roots and all, inhaling their oniony aroma. When the surrounding plants flower they will reseed the area we have just made bare.

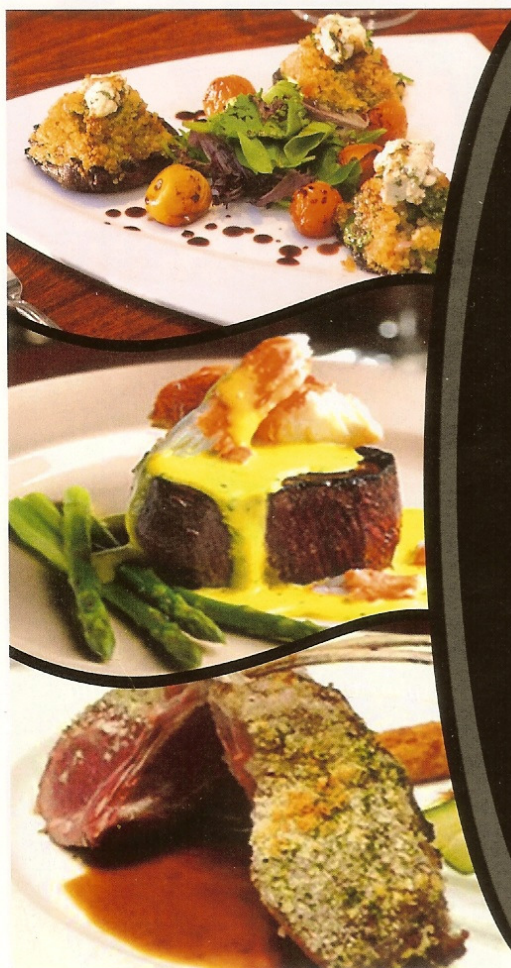
Blush tells us the Cherokee harvested leeks by cutting each bulb just above the root, a painstaking process that saved the plant for the future. To most modern foragers this seems too much careful work for about as much food as one green onion.

Perhaps that's why in Quebec picking wild leeks has been restricted and selling them has been banned.

Like onion or garlic, wild leeks can be used to add flavour and texture to other food. Or they can be baked, leaves and all, on top of a pizza or used to make soup.

### PHIL'S WILD LEEK SOUP

*Sauté some chopped leek bulbs in olive oil.*



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Add some peeled potatoes and vegetable or chicken stock. Cook until the potatoes are tender, adding salt to taste, then purée the mixture in batches. Return the mixture to the pot and add the chopped leaves of the leeks. Cook briefly until the leaves are softened, then purée the mixture again. It will be an appetizing shade of green. Season to taste.

**Note:** If wild leeks are not available, green onions can be substituted.

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Blush leads us to a patch of wild ginger growing on a hillside not far from the stream. The leaves are low and heart-shaped, the roots easy to spot as they snake along the ground between the leaf clusters.

We snip some of the roots. They smell like their cultivated cousin, but more pungent. And like their cousin, they can be used to flavour foods or dried to make ginger tea.



## TWO IMPORTANT NOTES:

**SOME PLANTS ARE DIFFICULT TO IDENTIFY.**

**Only forage under the watchful eye of a knowledgeable guide.**

**RESPECT PROPERTY RIGHTS.**

**Only forage if you have received permission from the landowner.**

There are no fiddleheads along this section of the trail, Blush tells us, although by now they will be appearing elsewhere. And we won't find morels — not until around Mother's Day. Other edible mushrooms won't arrive before summer.

We climb back over the stile, muddy and content, our sacks full of foraged food.

That night I chop up some leeks, cook them in a little oil, then add some swiss chard. I mix some peeled and chopped wild ginger root with roasting carrots.

The next morning I make Phil's wild leek soup, by far the best of my efforts; I can clearly distinguish the unique leek taste. My foraging adventure has been exhilarating — and sobering. I think of the leeks I dug up for my soup. It will take a full five years for the new leeks that grow in their place to be ready for picking. I calculate that single lunch represents 40 years of plant life.

Is foraging for wild food a responsible thing to do, I wonder. I think so, but only occasionally: our woods and streams, and the edible treasures they hold, can't possibly stand up to a stampede of eager pickers. And I can't help noticing a peculiarly modern irony: that foraging, a refuge of the hungry not so long ago, has become the lucky pastime of a well-fed few. ■

Belgian Nursery

# A FLOWER WORLD

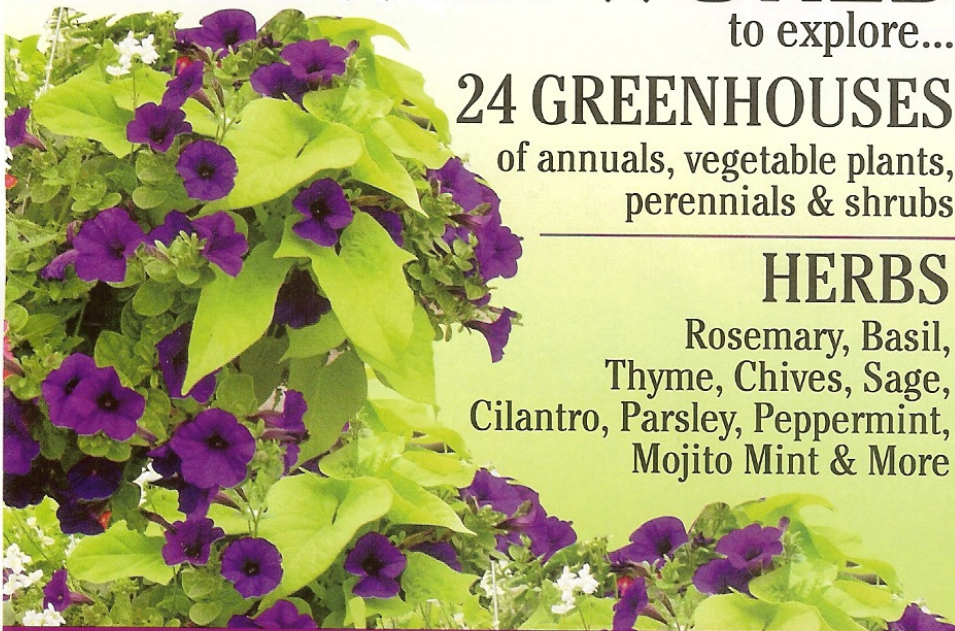
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