

THE NEXT STEP

Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM



Weed, Medicine, Or Food?

As we go to press, the earth here is bursting with greenery fed by our abundant rains. Have you ever stopped to wonder about the wild plants that emerge this time of year? Some people might call some of them “weeds” and prepare to spray them with toxic herbicides.

But are they really foes — or friends? It turns out that many of the plants that pop up in your yard can actually be added to your meals or used as healing medicine. For free!

How misunderstood the plants around us have become. We used to have a relationship with them that was daily and intimate.

Just consider that all the plants in the grocery stores were once just weeds in which our ancestors saw potential. We used to be able to look out onto land and read the landscape. We'd know where the fertile areas were and where water accumulated just by the plants that grew. These wild plants are also more nutrient-dense and germinate without our tending.

So what might be just outside your door that you could make into a delicious salad, nourishing pesto, or beneficial tea? Would you like to re-imagine the world of weeds?

Important: Before eating any plants, be sure that you have an accurate identification. If you're not sure, don't eat it. Also pick from areas that are free from toxic spray, road fumes, etc.

Here are some plants you can look for around here now:

■ **Dandelion** (*Taraxacum officinale*) is often considered a problem in yards and gardens, making it one of the more misunderstood weeds.

However, instead of killing it, we can eat it — from its roots to its blossoms. So you can add the young greens to salads or pestos, cook the flowers into fritters, infuse the leaves and roots for tea, roast roots for an alternative coffee, or make dandelion wine. Dandelion has been used as a potassium-rich diuretic, and to support liver function, help lower blood pressure, naturally detoxify, and much more. Its mild bitter taste is part of its gift, as it stimulates metabolism, helps absorb nutrients, and boosts the immune system.

■ **Wild radish** (*Raphanus raphanistrum*) fill our fields this time of year, and are a colorful treat, with flowers colored yellow, white, and lilac. The buds, flowers, young greens, and seed pods can add a zest to your salad or herbal pestos, and aid digestion. Wild radish is mainly in uncultivated areas with low soil fertility. Read more at www.eattheweeds.com/radish-mustard's-wild-rough-cousin.

■ **Garden mallow** (*Malva neglecta*) has geranium-like leaves with five or seven lobes and a deep taproot.

Its leaf has a mild taste which can be added to salads, cooked as a green, added to a herbal pesto, or used to thicken soups and stews. Mallow is



STEP Updates

■ **Thank you to everyone who has sent in your yellow STEP Feedback cards.** Your comments really do help us serve your needs. As usual, we'll report the survey results in the next issue.

■ **If you can't find your Feedback card, you can get a substitute** at www.healthyworld.org/STEPSurvey.html. Please send it in as soon as possible. Even just checking a few boxes helps! If you're a Sebastopol resident, please write that on the printout, plus your name and address, so it'll be counted in the official tally.

rich in vitamins A, B, and C, plus calcium, magnesium, and potassium.

Mallow is also astringent and mucilaginous, so it soothes sore throats, reduces inflammation, treats rashes, and more. See www.natureword.com/properties-and-benefits-of-mallow.

■ **Miner's lettuce** (*Claytonia perfoliata*) is a West County favorite for spring salads. It loves cool moist spots, grows in abundant patches, and is fleshy and crisp with a pleasant flavor.

You can harvest both its diamond and cup-shaped leaves, and eat it raw or steamed. It's a great tonic and spring cleanser, source of vitamin C and A, and immune system enhancer.

See pictures and learn more at www.healingweeds.blogspot.com/2012/10/miners-lettuce.htm and www.superfoods-for-superhealth.com/miners-lettuce.html.

■ **Plantain** (*Plantago lanceolata*) can be found throughout the county. One of the great herbal first aid plants, it's excellent for cuts, skin infections, chronic skin problems, and insect bites. It has a magical ability to pull out thorns and splinters that are deeply embedded.

Additionally, its young leaves can be eaten raw, steamed, sautéed, or added to a pesto. It's rich in iron and vitamins A and C, and supports the liver and urinary system.

■ **Cleavers** (*Galium aparine*) is not often celebrated, as the leaves and

See **Weeds**, over

Weeds, continued

seeds can stick to your clothes, scratch your skin, and take over your garden. Yet, here's the secret: it's one of the best lymphatic cleansing herbs, and can tone and soothe the kidneys and urinary tract. It's not edible raw, but is great as a sauté green, beneficial tea, pesto ingredient, or in soup. Learn more at www.altnature.com/gallery/cleavers.htm.

■ **Chickweed** (*Stellaria media*) is another spring plant friend that is delicious and nourishing. You can add young leaves, stalks, and flowers to salads. Or make an unforgettable pesto by blending it with virgin olive oil, organic garlic, sunflower seeds, salt, and a little water.

Chickweed also offers wonderful first aid relief, helping with minor burns, insect bites, psoriasis, and more. Just chew or pound it lightly, then put it on your skin as a poultice. When you find chickweed in your garden, it's also a sign of fertility, so great job on tending your soil.

For more, see www.thepracticalherbalist.com/holistic-medicine-library/chickweed-skin-rejuvenator and www.jeannieskitchen.me/category/garden-bettys-nasturtium-pesto.

Editor's note: Be sure to identify chickweed correctly (with a small white flower), as it can be confused with the potentially harmful scarlet pimpernel (with a pink/scarlet flower). See more at www.foragedfoodie.blogspot.com/2016/03/foraging-identifying-chickweed.html.

Exploring further

Here are some resources to help you identify and use wild plants for both food and healing, during all the seasons of the year.

- www.treehugger.com/lawn-garden/eat-dandelions-9-edible-garden-weeds.html. Includes more about some of the plants listed above.
- *Edible Wild Plants: Wild Foods From Dirt To Plate*, by John Kallas
- *The Wild Wisdom of Weeds*, by Katrina Blair
- *Family Herbal: A Guide to Living Life with Energy, Health, and Vitality*, by Rosemary Gladstar

- *The Herbal Kitchen*, by Kami McBride

~ Michelle Vesser

Michelle Vesser with Everything Sacred is a local garden and herbal educator and more. She has over 30 years of experience in Bio-intensive gardening. Contact her via www.everythingsacred.co if you want to create a new relationship with your "weeds," bring a neighborhood group together, or have her support you as a garden coach.

But Wait, There's More!

I hope that you enjoyed Michelle's article, and are excited and ready to see what you can find growing outside. I've also gathered some more juicy specifics for you here.

■ **Dandelion.** I talked with herbalist Beth Riedel, AHG, NC, who notes that people often misidentify similar plants as dandelions. Who knew? So check that it has a hollow stem and only one flower per stem. She notes that dandelion helps cleanse the liver (which most people in our society need) and that spring is a great time to eat greens (because even the bitter ones are at their sweetest).

■ **Garden mallow.** Author Linda Ly says that all parts of the plant are edible — root, stems, leaves, flowers, and fruits. She adds, "the fruits are pleasant and a little nutty ... pick them when they're still fresh and green. Read more at www.gardenbetty.com/2015/04/mallow-the-everywhere-edible-weed.

■ **Miner's lettuce.** Beth notes that she's found this in Ragel Park, when it's wet in the spring. Go past the top area, heading towards the right, and look under the oak trees. I've also read that people seed it intentionally on their land, as it needs little care. And apparently — chickweed often grows near miner's lettuce!

■ **Plantain.** This plant is very common and great to know how to

identify in the wild, to help care for yourself and others. Beth says that it "can be recognized by its circle of lance-shaped leaves with prominent parallel veining. It also has long thin stalks holding up small seed heads." She says you can use its leaves as a poultice by grating or chewing them, then placing them on a scrape, bee sting, or bug bite. Learn more about its uses at www.wellnessmama.com/5387/plantain-healing-herb and www.motherearthnews.com/home-steading-and-livestock/self-reliance/common-plantain-zm0z11zhun.

Other suggestions

- **It's usually best to harvest greens in the early morning**, when they're still fresh with dew.
- **Foraging can be a fun activity with children**, to help them connect to the earth and its natural healing ways.

More resources

- **Look up wild California plants by name** at www.calflora.org.
- **To develop your identification skills, look for an expert offering herb walks in your area.**
- **Find classes and herb walks at the California School of Herbal Studies**, www.cshs.com.
- **Beth Riedel**, AHG, NC does herb walks, classes, and consultations. (Willits, 707/459-1810)
- **For more tips about weed management**, see Weeds at www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html.

~ Patricia Dines

ABOUT STEP

The Next STEP (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program** (STEP). **STEP is a project of the City of Sebastopol**, implemented by local citizen volunteers. **STEP's mission** is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

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