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Wild foraging: The edible bounty at our feet - inner banks

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Since the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, people have been looking at the food system we rely on, namely the grocery store, and wondering if we have been taking it for granted.

On the Outer Banks, close to 100% of the food we consume is brought in from somewhere else. A recent report from a U.S.-based humanitarian organization called CARE says the number of people around the globe facing severe food insecurity or a food crisis could double to 270 million by the end of the year. At least 6 million people have registered for food benefits since the virus began to spread, according to the report.

It has some people turning to centuries-old practices, such as foraging, as a way to connect back to the land for respite and sustenance. A few stalwart locals are already looking to the bounty beneath their feet.

Rabiah Hodges, who lives in Nags Head Woods, had been spending tons of money on herbs for a heart condition when, after watching some videos on wild herbs, she realized those same plants grew all around her home.

"I was like, excuse me? I don't have to buy all of these things off of Amazon and I can find these things out in the woods?" Hodges recalls. Just in her driveway alone, she says she can find dandelion, chickweed and two types of plantain (the low-growing herb, not the fruit), all of which are considered nuisance weeds, but that actually have many medicinal anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial and digestive benefits.

Hodges uses herbal teas and tinctures for a litany of issues stemming from an inflamed gut, and about 30% of the herbs she uses are wild foraged around her home, she says.

Terry Rowell, another local forager, doesn't use specific plants for specific benefits, he just trusts that if he eats a variety of them, he'll get the nutrients he needs. Some of his favorites are sassafras, used to make root beer and thickening agents for things like gumbo, and lamb's quarters, which he says is tastier and more nutrient dense than spinach.

Rowell makes time to forage every day, he says, and sometimes what he finds makes up 100% of what he eats on a given day. Foraging may be a great way to have more food sovereignty and access to nutrient dense edibles, but for Rowell it's also a way to connect with his ancestors. Not only did Native Americans consume a foraged diet, but settlers survived the winter because they learned to eat it, too, says Rowell. "So, it gives you a connection to the past."

Jim Gould got into eating wild edibles as a kayak guide years ago. He had to learn the local flora and fauna for the tours, and then thought, "I'm going to try some of this stuff!"

He can name an endless number of native species he's tried: Yaupon holly, a native plant that is high in caffeine and can be dried for tea; dotted horse mint for digestion and antioxidants; duck

potatoes with roots that taste similar to water chestnuts; and cattails, the insides of which he says tastes crisp and flavorful like a cucumber.

Gould also forages plants such as American beautyberry to use as insect repellent when crushed up and rubbed on his arms.

Terri Kirby Hathaway, a marine education specialist for North Carolina Sea Grant in Manteo, organized an annual wild food festival that ran for years on the Outer Banks until the mid-1990s. People came from all over to create dishes from foraged plants and animals, she says. They'd make things like sea rocket quiche, mole crab stew, sea lettuce squares, glass wort cheese balls and beauty berry pie. But generally, contemporary society leans more toward ease and instant gratification, she says.

"It used to be you had to go out and find your own food and we've started relying so much on convenience," she says. "It's not convenient to go out into the marsh and collect things and bring them home and wash them and all that

As a result, "we've lost the connection to nature," she says. But, she notes, foraging is a great activity to get the whole family outdoors together.

There are some tips to foraging, don't pick close to the road and don't be greedy, leave some of the plant behind to reproduce. But all share a word of caution: always triple check your plant identifications before consuming anything. They suggest saving some of the plant in case you have a negative reaction and have to go to the doctor for medical assistance.

In fact, going with someone who knows what they're doing is the best idea for novices, they say.

But, Rowell says, no matter what, use foraging as an opportunity to be present in the moment.

"You can't be looking for these plants and have a ton of things going on in your mind," he says.

"You have to be completely just in it. ... And then you get to go home with a bunch of food!"

Note: It's always important to consult with your doctor before making any changes related to your health.

Terry Rowell, a local forager, doesn't use specific plants for specific benefits, he just trusts that if he eats a variety of them, he'll get the nutrients he needs. He's pictured munching on some wild foraged sea beans. Jim Gould got into eating wild edibles as a kayak guide years ago. Courtesy of Terry Rowell Courtesy of Jim Gould

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