

FORAGING 101



A beginner's guide to finding all the bounty nature has to offer.

By Gina Pagano

I designed this guide and class to help get you started on foraging safely and responsibly. We will go over the basics of finding and collecting items for food, medicine, and household work. This guide is specific to New England, but I am sure some of the plants, and the basic principles I will go over, will translate to other areas of the country.

Foraging is fun and rewarding. I cannot stress enough to respect Mother Nature and the other animals that also share in this bounty when out in the woodlands, meadows, and shoreline. If we deplete what is out there, out of greed, we will have nothing to come back to in future days.





That being said, let's go have some fun!



The Basics

Before you head out on the great treasure hunt for goodies, there are a few things to keep in mind. These can help determine if you will have a successful forage.

Where? There are many places you can forage:

-  **Woodlands**
-  **Parks/conservation areas, open spaces**
-  **The beach**
-  **Farms**

It is extremely important to find out where foraging is allowed before going out. Every state has its own rules. Connecticut forbids anything other than fungi to be taken out of state parks. Other states in the area have their own laws. Often, town parks, donated spaces, and conservation areas have their own rules. Check the websites prior to going and always look for signage at the parking areas. Foraging on private property can yield good results but ALWAYS get permission.

No one needs to get arrested, shot, or chased off by an unhappy canine!



You can get really creative and check out areas around businesses (they often landscape with edible plants and trees), bike paths, really, just use your imagination!

-Clean or Not?

- Unfortunately some of the spaces we hunt around, and where nature has found a way to grow, has not been well tended by humans. Dumping, pesticide use, chemical contamination, and run off can affect the areas you may want to go hunting in. I like to do some urban foraging but this means I need to check to see if there were buildings on the property and what they produced. Connecticut has a lot of old mill sites and millworks were notorious for chemical pollution.

Observations of your surroundings is a great and simple tool as well. For example; if your are collecting watercress on a river or streamside, look around. If there is an oily sheen to the water on the bank, you probably don't want to pick any cress there. Of you are out collecting dandelion greens at a local park and there is goose feces all over the meadow, I wouldn't risk getting ill by foraging there.

-Wash everything well when it allows (some fungi do not hold up well to water).

- Avoid areas very close to road and highways sides– auto pollution can creep into plants adjacent to them.
- Plants and fungi are great cleansers of the earth– some are purposefully planted to cleanse areas. This means that if you eat things from a polluted area, you can potentially become sick.





How to get started

So you want to get on out there and find things? Great! Here are a few suggestions that will really help you be successful at this venture.

- Pick a few things that have few, to no toxic lookalikes. Get really good at identifying them, the environment they thrive in and what else grows around them.
- Keep foraging guides with you– always reference when in doubt! I will provide some resources later.
- Take photos; it always helps to join some online groups.
- A lot of folks in those groups are willing to help with identifications.
- There are great foraging and mycological groups that do local, educational walks several times throughout the year (someday I may host one of these as well!).
- Figure out where things are likely to grow so as not to waste a trip and end up disappointed. For instance, Glasswort and bayberry grow along the shoreline so heading to a park up in Coventry to look for them is going to leave you with an empty basket.
- Have the proper equipment with you. This is really important! You can completely destroy what you are trying to harvest with the wrong tools.
- Don't just pull, yank, or cut down things if you don't have to. **FORAGE WITH AN EYE TO THE FUTURE!** There are proper tools and methods of obtaining the items you want from Mother Nature.
- Some of the things we want to forage are diminishing in quantities at an alarming rate.

-Things like Ramps are fragile in the ecosystem around here. There are proper ways of how to take from a ramp patch, and how much to take. If we don't nurture what is here, we may not have it to sustain us in the future.



- Another important thing to consider is who else may be benefitting from what we are harvesting as well. For many animals and birds and insects, the very same things we are out collecting, are essential to their survival. For instance; some folks like to collect viburnum or Arrowwood berries. I don't because their yield is so small you need a lot of them to do anything and they are a really important source of fats for migrating birds in the fall.
- The general rule of thumb on foraging is to always take 25% or less of an item you find.

Tools of the Trade

You'll need some basic things to get started. I wouldn't invest too much money in fancy equipment straight off—some simple items can get you well on your way.



1. A blade— get yourself a good pocketknife— make sure its sharp or you risk destroying the plant you want to harvest. There are some good curved fungi knives with attached brushes for cleaning available as well.
2. Carry bags— these can be tailored to what you want to bring home. Mesh bags are great, paper bags and some plastic as well (although I've found a lot of things wilt in plastic). There are waxed fabric bags available too.
3. Notebook and camera— I carry around a notebook for jotting down important info about the areas I forage in and my finds. There are waterproof notepads available that work great and are pocket sized. I like to photograph my finds as well— I just use the camera on my phone.
4. Map or tracking app— there are a couple of reasons for this; A) foraging often takes us off trail. And if you get REALLY into it, you make look up and find that you've wandered far off track. Having a map or tracking app can help get you back on trail fairly easily. B) Having the tracking app especially makes it easy to note when and what you find along a given area. I use Alltrails and add waypoints when I find something good. I also notate what the date is per hike so I can track where and when I want to look for things.
5. First aid kit— Obviously this is an easy one. It can take one second to slip, trip, fall, or otherwise get hurt out there. I was following a patch of chanterelles recently and tripped over a root, fell down an embankment and sprained my wrist and cut my arm. Luckily, I had my kit and was able to bandage the cut and head home.
6. Bug spray/sunblock— I cannot stress enough how you should apply both before heading out. Foraging leads us into leaves and other forest detritus— basically places where insects love to be. Tick born illnesses are rampant in this state so please do yourself a favor and spray and lather up. Lyme disease isn't worth a good haul of mistakes!
7. The extras— get a backpack or daypack for all of this fun stuff! I also recommend a headlamp, and some sort of Firestarter. You never know when you may get lost or injured and find yourself out there as darkness is falling. Being able to start a tiny fire can help rescuers find you and also save you from hypothermia if you are lost. I also keep a protein bar in the pack. And ALWAYS have some water with you.

Foraging by Season

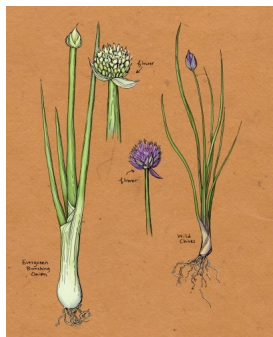
In this section I am going to go over the seasons and some great, basic, easy-to-identify items to forage! One thing I haven't addressed yet is that Foraging can be for more than just food items. You can forage for dye plants, medicinal items, and decorative things as well. Mother nature is just incredible! Side note: a lot of what we gather is identified via leaf shape, gill pattern, color, etc. Some toxic look alikes are differentiated by very minute variations. Be VERY sure of what you are gathering before you eat anything!



Spring

Spring is exciting because once I see all of the new growth everywhere, I want to just dive into the nearest leaf pile and start looking. There are some very useful items to forage in the spring; here are a few examples:

1. Wild onions/ wild garlic– one of the first things to come up and hang about for multiple seasons. Found in damp areas like marshes, near creek and riverbeds. The leaves can be eaten in salads, pastas, etc. The bulb is eaten like a small onion. Do not take more than half of each cluster.



2. Ramps– Ramps are akin to onions in the flavor department. They are highly sought after in the culinary world. They are also an at risk species here in Connecticut so be frugal when foraging for them. They have a specific way to cut and should always have some of the original plant left behind. They can be tricky to find and some plants look like them such as Hellbore, which is toxic. They are found on forest floors popping up through last years leaves. They tend to like hardwood forests.



3. Fiddlehead Ferns– Fiddleheads are the baby, unfurled growth of the ostrich fern. They have a brown, papery covering and a u-shaped stem. They are delicious! A strong, “green” taste to them. They **MUST** be boiled prior to any consumption or some gi distress will ensue. I boil them until the water turns blackish, empty and repeat. I then like to batter and fry them. They go great with steaks and venison as well. They are found in wetlands and marshy, swampy areas. Most ferns put out new growth the same way so check, check and check again! This is one of those species that if you take all you find, there wont be any new growth so don’t be selfish and take the whole stand. I’ll post a guide for this below.



4. Dandelions– one of the most prevalent weeds around, every part of the dandelion can be eaten. The roots have been dried and ground for a coffee substitute, the greens sauteed or used in sauerkraut, the heads in salads and syrups. Since you can find them everywhere, make sure lawn fertilizers and pesticides aren't used where you plan to harvest. Dandelions are some of the first food for pollinators in the spring so share with the wildlife!

5. Pheasantback or Dryad's Saddle mushrooms– these are a delicious spring fungi. Very easy to identify! You want to take the very young and tender flushes. The young ones look like pig snouts and the mushroom is a beautifully patterned thing. It has a distinct smell-watermelon rind. If you can lightly run your nail down the underside and scratch off the pores, its good!



6. Serviceberry aka Shadbush– This is one of the first berries of the season around here. It is generally ready to be picked in late spring/early summer. It is found throughout the woodlands and it is also used as decorative planting for parks and business landscapes. I have a stand I frequent in East Hartford that the town used in one of their parks. I asked the rangers there if I could pick them and they gave me the go ahead. The berries look like blueberries and are very sweet. I use them in baked goods and for jam.



Summer

Summertime brings with it all the goodies we have been waiting for! Berries abound, greens are everywhere, and fungi are starting to show up if you are lucky and it has been a wet spring. As an aside, I cannot stress enough that fungi are a whole different creature to forage. If you are not very careful, you can make yourself or others very ill or worse. I will go over a few fungi that are easily recognizable and have no toxic look alikes but I highly recommend getting specific books and taking a mushroom foraging class with experts. Here are a few summer goodies that are easy to find and collect.



1. Japanese Wineberries– These are such beautiful and fragile raspberry lookalikes, and they are tasty! As evidenced from the name, they are a highly invasive species that have managed to thrive in the northeast climate. Though you can buy these from a fruit catalog to grow, I would caution against it. They spread like wildfire. They are usually ready to harvest from June through August up here. They are delicious in jams, fruit leathers, and in baked goods, etc.

2. **Plantain**– This green is abundant and I can almost guarantee that if you have any kind of lawn around you, that it grows there. This is a plant you don't have to leave your neighborhood to find! All parts of this plant (there are 2 varieties-both edible) are edible and it also has medicinal uses. The seeds are peppery and a good flavor addition to things. The leaves are best eaten when young as they toughen up once they are larger. They are good in salads and can be sauteed as well. Additionally, this plant makes a great salve for cuts, scrapes, and insect bites. It has anti inflammatory and antibiotic properties.



3. **Pokeweed**– there has been some debate as to whether or not pokeweed is edible. I do not mess with this plant for culinary purposes whatsoever but I do use it for dying yarn and cloth. It's beautiful purple berries are ready late summer through fall. It produces a beautiful dark purple color that is just delightful in the winter hats my wife crochets. I'd highly recommend keeping it out of reach of children and pets. And wear gloves or have purple hands for a few days!



4. **Black Trumpet Mushrooms**– These odd shaped and colored fungi are an absolute treat! They are found midsummer through mid fall. They are abundant here in the northeast and can be found in woodlands and along the edges of wetlands and streams as well. They are a ground growing mushroom that comes in black, tan, and grey. I love them sauteed and on top of a good burger. For a slight mushroom they are very meaty in flavor. They also freeze well, which cannot be said of all mushrooms.



5. **Glasswort**– Here is where the absolute nerd comes out in me. This plant is amazing. In colonial times, when wood ran short, glasswort was burned and the ashes were used in glassmaking here in the northeast. It is a succulent type plant that is found growing in tidal marshes, along the shore. Its natural briny flavor lends it to a great addition to salads. I have pickled it for use on grinders and have dehydrated it and ground it into a green salt. Less processed than table salt and less sodium. It is a very versatile plant.



6. White Pine– White pine trees can be found everywhere around us. They are easy to identify due to the fact that they are the only pine to have 5 needles per bunch. This tree has a multitude of uses. Obviously wood is first and foremost. But a delicious tea that is rich in vitamin C can be made from it. The resin can be used to aid in fire starting. And you can also make a delicious “soda” from it. White pine needles have yeasts on them that ferment easily. You can have a soda that tastes like sprite within 4 days! All you need is the needles, some sugar, and water (preferably distilled). There a multitude of recipes you can find online but it is really easy and very low effort. Pine resin is also a good field dressing as it is antimicrobial.



Autumn

Late summer and early fall are my favorite times of the year to forage. There is so much of everything to be collected. It is wise to note that this is the time of year our woodland furry friends and insects are also prepping for the coming cold and lean months. I would kindly suggest that we leave a little extra than normal behind for our friends who need this sustenance as well. With so much easily available to us at this time of the year, it should be no hardship to do so.

1. Bayberry– you may have smelled the beautiful scent of bayberry in candles and air fresheners. This shrub is prevalent along the shorelines of the northeast and has a multitude of uses. The berries are used, as mentioned, to scent things. They are also a tasty addition to refreshing beverages! The leaves are a good, slightly muted, substitute for bay leaves in cooking as well. I toss a few in my sauces in place of bay leaves. They are great worked into a compound butter and alongside thyme, etc. in roasted chicken.



2. Chicken of The Woods Mushroom- I LOVE this mushroom! It cannot be mistaken for any other kind of fungi and generally grows in abundance. You may find some flushes of these in spring as well. It is substantial and meaty and has the texture of chicken. I have used older less desirable specimens for soup stock. I have had the prime specimens in buffalo “chicken” dip, “chicken” nuggets, chopped and cooked up in perogies, and a variety of other applications. It freezes well when vacuumed sealed and I have also dehydrated it and powdered it as a flavoring spice to add to other dishes.



You can see these beauties from a mile away on a dreary fall woods walk!

3. Autumn Olive Berries– The name is a bit of a misnomer. They are a great berry, prevalent, and not at all olive-like. This is another invasive species planted originally as an ornamental that took off across a wide range of spaces. Its roots actually release chemicals that inhibit the growth of native species around it. It is a cool looking plant in that the underside of the leaves are silvery and the berries have what looks like glitter on them! If you were to pick one and eat it off of the shrub, your mouth would pucker. Very tart! They are great in jams and spreads however! The seed inside it makes it less desirable in baked goods but I have used them for muffins and they weren't too crunchy. You can find them in fields, along trails and walking and biking paths. They tend to take over spaces left vacant as well.



4. Crabapple– We can find crabapple trees all over New England. They are a versatile tree. The wood is used for smoking a lot. It lends a good flavor to smoked meats. The fruit contains a high amount of pectin so it is great when added to apple jams to set them and also makes a great jam and jelly on its own. The juice from the apples can be fermented and made into a vinegar. And the fruits can be cooked up alongside roasted meats. This fall I plan to pickle some and add it to the top of a briar!



5. Acorns– Acorns are a power packed nut to be harvested in autumn. They are a complete protein as well! During “mast” years, oak trees will put out tons of acorns. They can also be frozen for processing later in the season. The trick is to find ones with the caps intact and no holes bored in the shell. Even so, occasionally you will get one with a little friend inside. I freeze all of mine and then process– a. it makes deshelling easier, and b. you can see the worm once you open it and discard. You must leech the tannins out of the nut meat before eating or it will be bitter. You will need to soak in water and change the water daily for a few days. There are plenty of recipes online. I use my ground up nuts as a flour in addition to others in gluten free recipes



6. Rose Hips– Most of us have roses growing in our yards. When the flowers have fallen off there is still the rose hip! I actually prefer to go to the shore and collect them from the beach roses that grow wild here and there. Rose hips are very high in vitamin C, antioxidants, and flavonoids. They have anti-inflammatory properties, can help with joint pain, can reduce diarrhea and is great for your skin. Rose hips can be made into oil for dermal application, can be dried and put into capsules for GI issues, can be made into a tea, and can be made into jam or jelly.



Winter

A lot of people use winter to hunker down and stay indoors. I like to go out into the woods and see what mother nature is still offering! You'd be amazed at what is still out there!

1. Shagbark Hickory– Shagbark Hickory Trees are very very common in the woodlands of the northeast. The Tree does put out an edible nut that I have not worked with as of yet. What I love about this tree is that you can boil the bark down to make a syrup that is akin to, but for me, tastier than, maple syrup. And it is so much less invasive to the tree than tapping a maple. The tree actually sheds its bark. You can use bark on the ground and also the bark that has separated from the tree like hair. Be very careful when taking that bark off. Take ONLY the bark that is already away from the trunk. Otherwise you will open the tree to disease and pests. Endangered brown bats roost in the bark at times as well so be careful! There are great and easy online recipes for making the syrup. I make it and can it for all year use.



Note how the bark peels away..

2. Bittercress– Bittercress is a plant that thrives in colder weather. You can find it along waterways and in swamps all year long but it is tastiest in late winter or early spring. It is used like all the other cresses. Great in a salad or pickled on sandwiches.



3 English Ivy– English Ivy is an "evergreen" plant that can be found year round. I use it to make a laundry detergent that is free from chemicals. English Ivy contains saponins which is a great natural soap substitute. You can gather a bunch of the ivy, boil the leaves down and then you have a soapy liquid left. Refrigerate and use as laundry soap. You can add an essential oil for scent if you'd like as well. There are really easy recipes online.



4. Burdock – Burdock and all other docks are edible. The young leaves are great greens for a salad in spring and summer. The root is a great starch to eat. Akin to a potato, sort of. These roots are best dug up in January or February. They can be boiled or mashed or roasted. Really, anything you can do with a potato, you can do with a burdock root.



5. Winter Oyster Mushroom– Winter oysters are a treat. Oyster mushrooms in general are a delicious fungi to eat anytime. Oyster mushrooms can be mistaken for several others that are going to make you sick, so I advise that you be very sure of what you are picking before you try it. If you know what you are looking for, you are going to be very happy with these fungi!



Some side notes from me to you:

With regards to fungi; any fungi can cause GI upset to some folks, if they are sensitive. Even the most prized mushrooms can make you ill if your body is sensitive. I always recommend cooking ALL fungi before eating. Also, try a very small mouthful first. Wait 20 minutes, if nothing happens try again and if all is well after that, you should be good. It's a bit time consuming but better than retching your guts out later.

Wash everything you forage well. Even fungi, if they'll hold up. Animals and insects (and sometimes humans) urinate and defecate all over the woods. Aside from it just being gross, you can get parasites if you aren't careful. For example, slugs love fungi. Slugs carry a parasite in their saliva that, while it shouldn't kill you, will make you very sick for a bit, thus I avoid anything with slug trails on them.

We never intend to get lost in nature but it happens. I advise carrying a day pack when foraging. I always carry a flashlight and a Firestarter as well as, one or two protein bars and plenty of liquid to drink.

Always let someone know where you are going. Accidents happen. I once was so intent on following a trail looking for morels, that I didn't see a root on the trail and tripped. I fell down a ravine, cut my knee and sprained my wrist. Luckily I was able to get up and get back to my truck but if I had been injured worse, someone would have needed to know where I was.

I always track my routes with either Alltrails or Strava 1. it's a good way to keep track of where you wandered off path. 2. I can title the hike with where and when and what time of year and set waypoints with what I find. That way I can chart what is where for next year.

It is easy to get distracted and lose track of who's around you when you are on the hunt for goodies. Unfortunately we live in a world that isn't always safe. Try to keep a situational awareness of who is in your vicinity. It never hurts to have bear or pepper spray, a knife, or a firearm with you when you are alone. Less likely but still possible is an animal attack as well. But honestly, I worry more about other humans.

Be weather smart. Check the weather before going out. A nice summer rain isn't horrible to be caught out in, but a raging thunderstorm is and sudden heavy rain can put you in a bad spot for flash flooding if you are near running water.

Resources

This section is a must, especially if you are new to foraging. Until you are sure about what you are gathering, check, check, and recheck. I use a combo of foraging groups online, books, and online videos, as well as the expertise of people I've met who have done this for years. I'll try to do this by type.

1. Online Resources:

Facebook pages-

Foraging Southern New England

Foraging With Friends RI/MA/CT

Connecticut Foraging Club

Mushrooms of Connecticut

The New England Mushroom Identification Forum

The Grizzly Forager

2. Apps-

Inaturalist

Seek

3. Local Groups:

The Connecticut Foraging Club

Black Sun Farm

The 3 Foragers

Spike Mikulski(out of RI)

And many many others!

4. Books:

Foraging With Kids by Adele Nozedar

Foraging New England by Tom Seymour

Wild Edibles by Sergei Butenko

Mushrooms of the Northeast by Teresa Marrone and Walt Sturgeon

Edible and Medicinal Mushrooms of New England and Eastern Canada by David L. Spahr

Field Guide to Mushrooms by The Audubon Society

A Little Bit About Me

I am a self taught forager. I have spent countless hours out in the field and with my nose buried in reference books and lurking around the foraging pages. I live in East Hartford so I started with urban foraging and spread out from there. I forage and preserve most of the year and also love to enter some of the goodies I make in the local fairs. Most of my Christmas gifts are things I have foraged and preserved and I eventually intend to be a little old lady that sells her goods out of a shed on my property.

