

Wild Local Food
By Crystal Stinson

When we think about local food, we often mean the food that is grown by ourselves, or by people geographically close to us. The crops that our local farmers grow, the fruit, vegetables and preserves that can be found at the local farmer's market, and the honey, eggs, bread, or meat that are just a phone call away.

These are great sources of local food, and there is a list of local food producers available at the Town and RM office. I would encourage people to give these folks a call and get to know where your food could be coming from.

I would like to have a look at local wild food in this article. Before the dawn of agriculture, humans were a hunting and gathering society. I'd like to focus on the "gathering" side.

Many wild plants are edible, and it is important to note that there are some dangerous ones as well, so before you add a new food to your dinner plate, be 100% sure that you have identified it correctly.

I remember many wonderful days of berry picking with the family at the farm or along a river bank to collect enough Saskatoon berries for several pies and some jars of jam. A grove of good berry trees is a treasure passed on from one generation to the next. Wild berries, such as Saskatoon, choke cherry, raspberry and strawberry can be found around the prairies and eaten right off the shrub, or jams, jellies, juice, and syrup can be made from these berries. A perfume-scented jam, jelly or syrup can be made from rose-hips. All of these berries & hips can also be made into wine.

The leaves of certain plants can be made into teas, such as wild mint, stinging nettle, rose and raspberry. Spring is a good time to go collect leaves, while they are young and tender and haven't turned bitter. Collect the leaves, allow them to dry and store them in an air-tight container, and use for loose leaf tea throughout the year.

There are a few varieties of mushrooms that grow of the prairie that are edible – my husband tells me that when he was a kid, his mom would pick puffballs and fry them up in butter. Personally, mushrooms make me nervous because there are some varieties that are very poisonous that look similar to the good ones, and I haven't been taught how to tell the difference.

Several wild plants are very nutritious, and can be used in a variety of ways. For example, there are several ways to eat stinging nettle (once the leaves of the plant are dried, soaked or cooked, the toxic compounds that cause stinging reaction to skin are neutralized). The cooked leaves of stinging nettle taste similar to spinach and are rich in vitamins A, C, D, iron, potassium, manganese and calcium; they are also high in protein. The leaves can be added to mixed greens, or cooked into polenta, pesto or soup. The dried leaves make a very healthy tea, which has historically been referred to as a cure-all for things such as the common cold and sore throats to very serious afflictions such as cancer.

Other plants that you may not have considered a possible part of your diet are weeds. There is a lovely book available at the Craik library (CSLP collection) called "Edible Garden Weeds of Canada" by Adam Szczawinski and Nancy Turner, which contains a wealth of information of edible weeds, including how to recognize, where to find, how to use them, and many recipes. There is everything from "Candied Spearmint" to "Cream of Lamb's Quarter's Soup" to "Oriental-Style Chickweed". There are several recipes for dandelions, including one for dandelion coffee and one for dandelion wine.

Spring is a wonderful time to be outside and explore the hills and valleys around this great town, and a great opportunity to have a look around for the food that nature has provided, free of charge.