

# Foraging for food connects you to nature, but do your homework before you eat

December 2 2021, by Will Pry

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To occupy his mind during long-distance trail runs, Philip Stark started

noticing the variety of plants in the fields around him, then the way they changed with the seasons. As the plants bloomed and thrived over time, he began to wonder, "Can I eat that?"

So Stark, a professor of statistics at the University of California, Berkeley, challenged himself to identify a new edible plant every week and to have something foraged in his diet every day.

"Once your brain regains the hunter-gatherer mode of operation that we've all evolved to have, you start seeing the plants everywhere—and not just in what we normally consider 'nature,'" Stark said. "As I started to notice these plants growing in urban ecosystems, the obvious question was, 'Is it safe to eat if it's growing on a roadside or your sidewalk?'"

Interest in foraging has been on the rise, with some professional foragers reporting vastly increased interest in their services since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before the lockdowns, foraging was becoming something of a trend for upscale foodies and survivalists alike.

"Modern agribusiness has greatly reduced the diversity of foods that are available to buy from [grocery stores](#) or suppliers—or that farmers even raise," said Stark, a lead researcher for Berkeley Open Source Food, which promotes the consumption of wild and feral foods. "And for chefs to have a larger set of ingredients with different flavors, different textures, different mouth feel is really exciting. It opens a lot of culinary opportunity."

Stark and his colleagues map the availability of foraged foods, measure their nutritional content and test them for environmental contaminants. "We intentionally picked study areas that were likely to be environmentally challenged, and if the [food](#) in places like that is safe to eat, it ought to be safe almost anywhere."

A nutritious plant-based diet may lower the risk for [heart](#) attacks and other types of cardiovascular disease, according to two studies published in August in the *Journal of the American Heart Association*. One found eating a plant-centered diet in young adulthood lowered the risk in middle age for [heart attack](#), stroke, heart failure and other cardiovascular conditions. The other found eating a special plant-based diet that targeted cholesterol reduced the number of cardiovascular events and cases of [heart failure](#) in postmenopausal women.

"There are a lot of upsides to foraging, but you really have to know what you're doing," said Penny Kris-Etherton, a nutrition professor at Pennsylvania State University. "There are a lot of poisonous plants out there, especially mushrooms. That's a huge problem if you're just thinking that everything out there is edible when in fact, it's not."

Mushrooms of the non-poisonous variety are among the most popular and easily foraged foods, along with numerous varieties of greens, fruits and berries. But there is nutritional value to be found in a variety of roots, nuts and seeds, depending on the region and season.

Though the [health benefits](#) of a largely plant-based diet are numerous, it's important to make sure any diet is well-rounded, Kris-Etherton said, and trying to find all the necessary nutrients in the wild would make foraging an around-the-clock endeavor.

"You need to get enough protein—and from plant foods, that means getting legumes or nuts," she said. "Be sure it's just not all leafy greens and fruits."

Stark said he doesn't advocate foraging as a sole source of nutrition but as a way to add "fresh, free, nutritionally dense and delicious seasonal variety to one's diet—and to connect with the environment, get some physical activity, and to get in touch with our inner hunter-gatherer."

He said it's also important for foragers to take safety measures and be aware of legal and ethical issues before grabbing greens from the ground and putting them on a plate. Here are Stark's tips:

- Learn about the [plants](#) before you pick them. "I strongly recommend taking a class with an experienced forager to get you oriented to what's growing in your particular area. Don't identify something just a single way. Use several sources of information—and make sure that the plant fits the description. Don't force it to fit the description."
- Introduce foraged foods to your diet slowly. "Even if you're 100% certain of the identification, you should be careful not to eat too much of it the first time because you might be allergic to it."
- Be aware of the laws in your area. "Foraging is generally not permitted on public lands, nor are you allowed to trespass on people's private property and forage."
- Think about sustainability. "Be aware of what part of the plant you're taking. I'm more likely to pick some leaves from a dandelion than to pull the dandelion up. I tend to take less than 10% of what's there, depending on what it is and whether it's a non-native, invasive or native plant."

Stark also notes that foods available to forage change as the seasons change, which adds variety in taste and nutrition.

"Eating too much of any one thing probably isn't good for us, and so keeping it hyperseasonal and hyperlocal probably pushes us in the right direction."

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