Invasive Weeds You Can, and Should, Be Eating – Easy Foraging

If you're a gardener, the single most time-consuming thing you probably do for your greens is to weed them. Unless you have a killer raised bed setup, the odds are good that your wimpy garden plants won't be able to withstand the onslaught of weeds perfectly optimized to thrive in the conditions you've created.

Watching your kale get overrun by chokeweed is enough to make the most seasoned gardener despair, but what if the way you are thinking about these garden nuisances is actually completely wrong?

Weeds aren't always bad. Ralph Waldo Emerson once famously proclaimed that weeds were simply misunderstood, as "…a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered". Though it might be hard for you to match his candor, the truth is that there's a lot to like about common weeds that few of us are aware of.

As it turns out, weeds have far more benefits for our health than you can imagine.

Garden Weeds: Even Healthier Than Your Vegetables?

It takes a tremendous amount of effort to get garden plants to produce food. No matter how carefully you try to coax your tender plants to thrive, the odds are good that without some significant effort on your part, the close-growing weeds will soon take them over. While it's easy to hate weeds for their effortless abilities to overwhelm your hard work, the truth is that the scrappiness of weeds is part of what makes them so

special.

To understand this, keep in mind that every garden plant once started as a weed that was carefully grown over centuries until it came to resemble the plant that it is today. Fruits got bigger, inedible seeds got smaller, and unpleasant bitterness in leaves slowly became reduced. However, as the traits humans enjoyed best slowly became more prominent, the biggest benefits of these plants – their nutritional content – was slowly weeded out.

Wild plants don't get the benefit of careful gardening to keep them alive, so they've adapted to defend themselves. For this reason, weeds are often full of phytonutrients, essentially an "arsenal of chemicals" that helps them fend off diseases and predators. While the bitter taste they produce often keeps the hungry away, these chemicals are full of health benefits for humans that help them fight off diseases like heart disease, dementia, and even cancer. Filled with vitamins and mineral levels that regular vegetables can't compete with, garden weeds are truly more nutritious than supermarket greens. If you want the easiest, most efficient way to fill your diet with foods as close to nature as possible, chomping on wild weeds is a great place to start.

Types of Edible Weeds

The complete list of edible weeds is far too vast for any web article, but this list of common weeds from around the world should get you started.



Clover

You'll find yourself lucky in a patch of clover even when four leafed varieties are nowhere to be found. Red clover is full of the phytoestrogen genistein, a substance that has been studied to treat colon and prostate cancers. While you might have to compete with the honeybees for your supply, raw clover can be chopped into salads or sauteed with other greens. However, there is some concern for pregnant women. Studies have shown that the large amounts of the phytoestrogens in clover may increase your risk of breast cancer and possibly birth defects.



Lambs Quarters (Goosefoot)

Young, tender, and very versatile, lambs quarters can be used as a substitute for spinach in any recipe. This is great news for salad lovers, as lambs quarters peak right when spinach is winding down for the summer. Loaded with vitamins A, C, and K and full of calcium and protein, you are actually better off eating this wild spinach over the cultivated variety. If you are filled with patience, the seeds from lambs quarters can also be collected and cooked as a quinoa-like grain filled with 16% protein.



Dandelions

Though you might cringe at the sight of their sunny-hued flowers blanketing your lawn, dandelions are actually nutritious and surprisingly delicious when used well. In fact,

European settlers first brought the dandelion to the U.S. for use as a salad green. One cup of raw dandelion greens contains well over your daily needs of vitamin A and vitamin K. The best ways to eat dandelions tends to be raw in salads or dried into herbal teas. For those feeling a little more adventurous, the yellow flowers can be breaded and fried for a tasty snack.



Catnip

Not simply a treat for cats, catnip actually has some fascinating health benefits for humans, too. Native to Europe, catnip easily grows around the world and makes for a great herbal tea that encourages relaxation. The mild mint flavor is tasty when snacked on raw or sauteed with other greens



Plantain

Though it has little resemblance to the tropical fruit with the same name, plantain weeds grow all over the world and make for a stellar medicinal plant that can be used topically to soothe skin ailments like rashes or burns. Even better, the younger leaves are tasty in salads and can be steamed, boiled, or sauteed. If you take the time to harvest the seeds, they can be ground into a nutritious flour that’s great for baking.



Bamboo

Though bamboo’s versatility has been put to use on everything from flooring to kitchen cutting boards, few people are aware that this fibrous plant is also edible. Often described as tasting like corn, bamboo shoots can be harvested when they are less than two weeks old and added to your favorite stir fry. Simply peel off the outer leaves and cut the tender middle into one-eighth inch slices before boiling them in an uncovered pan for twenty minutes. After the bitterness has been boiled out, you can eat bamboo any way you choose.



Garlic Mustard

Though it’s highly invasive throughout much of the world, garlic mustard originally came from Europe. The flowers, leaves, seeds, and roots of garlic plants make them great for weight loss and controlling cholesterol levels, and their faint garlic scent makes them a tasty addition to any dish. You can harvest garlic mustard all season long, but the tastiest roots need to be collected in the early spring.



Green Amaranth

Similar to lambs quarters but with a more mild taste, green amaranth is also known as redroot, pigweed, and wild beet. Because of the detergent-like qualities of the saponon on raw leaves, green amaranth is best cooked before eating to eliminate the strange aftertaste. For this reason, it’s often best to serve green amaranth with a stronger tasting vegetable to offset its mild flavor.



Watercress

There’s no avoiding the high price tag of watercress in classy grocery stores, but you can harvest it yourself for free. This weed can be found throughout the U.S. Adding it to your salads is a foolproof way to boost up your daily antioxidants.



Kudzu

While “the weed that ate the south” is a symbol of despair for millions in America, this voracious plant is actually edible itself. Simple to make into jams and jellies and tasty when the flowers are pickled, there’s a lot of ways to experiment with this tricky vine. Commonly used as a digestive aid in China, you can also chop up a cup of kudzu leaves and boil them for thirty minutes before drinking the health-infused creation.



Mallow (Cheeseweed)

Common to see in yards around the world, mallow is a blessing for adventurous eaters to enjoy. Both the leaves and seed pods are edible and can be enjoyed steamed, boiled, or raw as a salad green. Mallow is full of vitamins and minerals that make it useful as an herbal medicine, especially when used as an anti-inflammatory, diuretic, or laxative.



Purslane

If you only choose to eat one weed from your garden bed, purslane should be the one. This succulent looking plant grows close to the ground and in between the cracks of the sidewalk. If you find some, you’re in luck. This juicy, lemon-tasting green is filled with omega-3 fatty acids. It is tasty eaten raw, cooked or blended in a smoothie. Because every part of the plant can be eaten, you won’t have to worry about shoving it all in your mouth at once. As an extra benefit, purslane consistently produces a bumper crop of edible seeds, which can be used for baking. All you need to do is dry out the seeds for several weeks on a sheet of plastic before winnowing out the tiny, black seeds.

In Summary

The benefits of spending your summer days wrist deep in garden

dirt cannot be underestimated, but there’s a lot you can do to enjoy fresh grown produce without the effort. Garden weeds are equipped to thrive where your vegetables suffer, and most of them actually contain more vitamins and minerals than conventionally grown produce. If you’re ready to enjoy the benefits of these long-valued “famine foods”, give your garden weeds a try and see how they make you feel. You might be amazed at the results.

Related Reading:

- *The Amazing Benefits of Stinging Nettles, with Recipes*
- *Mulberries and Mulberry Recipes*
- *How to Start a Vegetable Garden – How to Grow Vegetables*
- *Dandelions*
- *The Health benefits of Moringa: A Modern Miracle Tree*

Sources:

- *Breeding the Nutrition Out of Our Food* – NY Times
  Phytoestrogens – Wikipedia
- *Eight Weeds You Can Eat* – Rodale’s Organic Life
- *Please Eat the Dandelions: Nine Edible Garden Weeds* – Treehugger.com