Edible Wild Plants in Northwestern Ontario: A Primer

Did you know many wild plants growing in northwestern Ontario are edible? While berries are the most popular wild edibles, tubers, leaves, flowers, and stems of many plants found in northern forests and freshwaters are edible. Some can be eaten raw, others need to be boiled or roasted. Both Aboriginal and settler communities have long traditions of harvesting these plants. They are an important part of our forest and freshwater food system.

Basic Rules of Edible Wild Plant Collection

• Be sure you know what you are picking, and eat only plants you can positively identify as edible. It’s best to spend time with a local expert, but many books and even local courses or workshops can be helpful.
• Harvest plants in areas where you know there is low risk of contamination from industrial and other pollution.
• Try eating small quantities of any plants you haven’t eaten before.
• Foraging edible plants is permitted on most public land in Ontario, however, make sure you have the property owners’ permission before collecting plants on private property. Also, part of best practices includes contacting the local First Nation community.
• Most importantly, take only what you can use and use what you take. Edible wild plants are a shared resource. We need to make sure they will return year after year.
**Mountain fly honeysuckle** is found from Alberta east to Newfoundland. The honeysuckle berries can be made into a tea, juice, or preserve. Nectar can be sucked from the flower, hence the name 'honeysuckle'.

**Cloudberries** are found across Canada, Europe and Asia. The berries are highly regarded in Norway and are referred to as 'highland gold'. The berries can be eaten raw, added to baking, or preserved as a jelly.

**Goldenrod** is found throughout North America except in southeastern portions of the United States. Goldenrod can be cooked like spinach and added to dishes. Herbal teas are also made from goldenrod. The flowers can be added as an edible garnish to a dish. The seeds can also be used to thicken stews/gravies, or used as a survival food.

**Labrador Tea** grows in wet, acidic areas throughout Canada. The leaves can be chewed or steeped in boiling water to make tea. There is evidence that large doses can be toxic as Labrador tea contains toxic alkaloids. Use sparingly.

**Marsh marigold** is found in wet areas across Canada and into the southern United States. Marsh marigolds contain a toxic compound called glycoside protoanemanin which is why it is recommended to boil the plant twice before consumption. The plant can be pickled and the greens can be cooked as a potherb. Do not eat raw.

**Cattails** can be found in almost any wet area of North America and are an incredibly versatile food source. In fact, no green plant produces more edible starch per acre – not potatoes, rice, or yams! Young shoots in spring can be peeled and eaten raw or as asparagus, immature flower spikes can be boiled for a few minutes and eaten like corn on the cob, pollen can be gathered as flour and mixed with wheat flour, root buds can be cooked or eaten in late summer, and root stalks can be pounded to make flour in fall and winter.

**Hazelnuts** are found in woodlands and forest edges from the southern portions of Canada south to Georgia. Hazelnuts come in both the European commercial variety and the smaller American and beaked varieties. The nut can be opened and eaten raw, roasted, ground into flour, or candied. Only use nuts without boreholes as bugs like to burrow in and eat the nut. The nut should be picked when the outside is green and the shell inside is brown.

**Chanterelles** are found throughout the world. They are especially prized in North America and Europe. The chanterelle mushroom can be used in any dish that calls for mushrooms. Chanterelles can be eaten raw, cut into slices and sautéed in butter, pickled, dried, or canned. Be sure to have a good mushroom identification book or consult a local expert.

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Wild ginger grows in average, medium to wet, well-drained soil, in part shade to full shade. Wild ginger prefers constantly moist, acidic soils in heavy shade. The rhizomes are dried and eaten as a spice or simmer as a ginger substitute. Fresh roots are used in stir-fry. The roots can also be boiled with sugar water to form a syrup that can be used to flavour desserts.

Wild rice is found from British Columbia to Newfoundland (excluding Saskatchewan) and throughout the southern United States to Florida. Wild rice has a long history of use by Aboriginal Peoples as a valuable food staple. Processing wild rice has many steps. First the rice is collected in a boat by hitting the stalks with a stick, which causes the rice to drop. Next the rice is dried or cured and then thrashed by trampling or dancing. Lastly, the rice is winnowed to remove the chaff. Wild rice is eaten plain or in any rice dish. Wild rice can also be ground into flour. Wild rice is highly nutritious since it is high in protein and fibre while low in fat.

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Ostrich fern is a gourmet wild vegetable found across much of North America in the springtime. Unfurled fiddleheads, simply boiled or steamed and served with butter are superb. Be sure to check for brown scales, not fuzz.

Black spruce is found across Canada in the boreal forest. Black spruce has been used to prevent scurvy due to its high vitamin C content. The inner bark can be harvested in spring and eaten fresh or dried. The inner bark can also be ground into a meal in order to extend flour in hard times. The young tips can be boiled as an emergency food. A tea can be made from the branches.

Birch is found across Canada and into the northern United States. The sap is boiled down to produce syrup. The process requires 80 litres of sap to produce 1 litre of syrup. Birch syrup is sometimes mixed with maple syrup to give it a sweeter taste. The birch twigs and bark can also be used for a tea.

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**Plantain** is found throughout North America. Plantain leaves can be eaten raw in salads or cooked in any dish. The seeds can be made into a meal or flour. Plantain is rich in vitamin A, C and K.

**Yarrow** is found throughout North America on mildly disturbed soil of both grasslands and open forests. The leaves of yarrow can be added to mixed salads, either cooked, or raw. Young leaves are less bitter. The flowers and leaves can also be made into a tea. Yarrow has also been used as flavouring for beer.

**Yellow water lilies** are found from Manitoba to Nova Scotia in wetlands. The root can be eaten as a root vegetable or potatoes, but is considered bitter by some, even after boiling in multiple changes of water. The seeds can ground into a flour or winnowed and cooked like popcorn.

**Wintergreen** is found from southeastern Manitoba to Newfoundland and south to Alabama. The leaves can be steeped to create a tea that has a minty flavour. The leaves and fruit can be eaten on the trailside or used in baking to impart a mint flavour.

**Juniper** is found throughout Canada. The crushed berries can be added to baking, eaten raw, added as a spice to cooking, or drank as a tea. Young twigs can also be chewed. Eating excessive amounts can be toxic, use with caution.

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