

## Wild Spring Edibles Abound in Vermont's Forests and Meadows



Have you ever gathered wild edibles? In spring, the first rounds of edible plants emerge from forest leaf litter and pop up to greet the warming sun in open fields across the state. For wild edible enthusiasts and local food proponents, these early edibles represent some of the first fresh food available after a long winter dormancy. Long anticipated and jealously guarded, wild edibles are prized by home cooks and chefs alike. Here are some things you might expect to find in the spring woods and fields, as well as safety and sustainability considerations when harvesting wild plants.



Harvested fiddleheads ready to cook

**Fiddleheads:** Fiddleheads are the young, curled fronds of the ostrich fern, which are harvested for use as a vegetable. Usually emerging in early May (in Vermont), they are harvested before the frond has opened.

**Habitat:** Ostrich ferns grow wild in wet areas throughout northeastern North America, especially in shady river bottoms, but also in rich forests dominated by hardwood tree species.

**Identification:** When identifying ostrich fern fiddleheads, keep in mind that the stalks are smooth. The coiled tops, on the other hand, are often covered with brown papery flakes. There will be a deep, u-shaped trough running along the top side of the stalk - this is an important identifier.

**Harvesting:** Gather fiddleheads in mid to late spring. Harvest before the leafy part of the frond unfurls. Like asparagus, the part nearest to the ground may be too tough to eat. Also like asparagus, you can snap, rather than cut, to harvest.

**Flavor and Preparation:** The flavor of the roasted, steamed or boiled fiddlehead is somewhat similar in flavor and texture to asparagus. Fiddleheads contain a toxin, and should not be eaten raw. It is recommended that they be boiled for 15 minutes, and some proponents suggest changing the water half way through this process.



Fiddlehead ferns

**Sustainability:** Harvest no more than half of the fiddleheads in an area, and do not go back for a second harvest in the same year. The other half of the ferns are needed to produce spores and maintain the patch for future years.

**Ramps:** These beautiful spring greens, also known as wild leeks, are of the allium family, and related



Ramps often grow in patches

in Appalachia, from Georgia to Canada. They prefer moist ground, and also occur in lowlands with streams and ponds.

Look for hellebores, ferns and moss - ramps often thrive in areas that also support these species.

to cultivated garlic and onions. Sought after by gourmands, they are one of the first green to emerge from the forest floor, quickly sprouting leaves before other vegetation has the opportunity to crowd them out.

**Habitat:** Ramps occur at higher elevations and along steep mountainsides



Ramps thrive in the moist, rich soil of hardwood forests

**Identification:** Ramps are often easy to spot. They show up as green patches in hardwood forests before any other vegetation has started to grow. Look for broad-leafed, green leaves resembling those of the (poisonous) lily of the valley. They often occur in patches throughout a forested area. There is often a purple tint to a ramp's stem, however, the best way to confirm that you have a ramp is to break off a portion of a leaf, and use your sense of smell. Ramps will have a very distinct odorous scent, which will strengthen if the leaf or root is crushed or broken.



Ramps cleaned and bunched

**Harvesting:** You can harvest just the leafy greens, but most choose to dig up the entire plant. Like onions and garlic, ramps have a bulb-like root below the surface of the soil. The roots tend to entwine themselves around roots and rocks, so a good shovel is a must. Ramps are delicate and should be placed in a bag or basket, and covered with moist towels for transport.

**Flavor and Preparation:** Ramps are highly versatile. The leaves can be chopped and added to salads, eaten like lettuce, spinach or any other spring green, or made into dressings and pesto. The roots can also be eaten raw, and are very popular pickled. The entire plant can be sautéed in olive or coconut oil, and served as a green vegetable with a sprinkling of salt.



Ready for pickling



Pickled ramps

**Sustainability:** Because of their soaring popularity, both for fresh eating and pickling, ramps are in danger of overharvesting. Never harvest an entire patch. Ramps readily take to cultivated soil, so transplanting and garden cultivation is an option. While harvesting ramps, you can also collect the seed heads, or roots can be transplanted much like onion starts. Some experts recommend only harvesting from a particular ramp patch once every five years, so responsible wildcrafters often rotate between multiple patches and locations.

**Morel Mushrooms:** Morchella, or true morels, are a type of edible mushroom with a distinctive honeycomb cap. Their wonderful creamy, mild and nutty flavor makes them a rare prize of a foraging expedition.



**Habitat:** Morels can be found all over the northern hemisphere, mainly in forested areas around the base of elm and ash trees. Old abandoned apple orchards are also great places to search.

**Identification:** Morels are one of the easiest and safest mushrooms for novice foragers to find. However, **always exercise caution when harvesting**

**mushrooms and other wild edibles!** Although not usually difficult to identify, true morels do have poisonous cousins with a similar look. The two most important features to examine when trying to identify a morel mushroom are the cap shape and whether the interior is hollow. Morels have a distinct, ridged and pitted cap. The cap should be attached to the stem and not hanging free. The other crucial step to identifying a morel is to slice the mushroom lengthwise. A true morel will always be hollow inside from the tip of the cap to the bottom of the stem.



The distinct, ridged and pitted cap of a morel



A true morel will always be hollow inside



A mesh bag allows spores to spread



Beware of false morels!

**Harvesting:** Cut morels off at ground level. The underground portion of the plant will ensure that there are additional morels for next season. If you have one, put morels into a mesh bag. This allows the spores to fall to the ground as you move through the forest, sowing the "seeds" of future harvests.

**Flavor and preparation:** If you've been fortunate enough to find some fresh morels in season, begin preparation by shaking off excess dirt. Halve or quarter them, and soak in heavily salted water for several hours. This helps clean them and more importantly, drives out any worms or bugs that might be in or on the cap. Rinse and then squeeze out excess moisture. Morels are mild, nutty and creamy, and are wonderful sautéed in butter. They are a great pairing to ramps, asparagus or other spring vegetable. Morels can also be dehydrated for longer term storage.

**Sustainability:** Mushrooms spread from mycelium, spores and sclerotia. Mushrooms live mostly as a mycelial mat in the soil. As with fiddleheads and ramps, always leave some mushrooms behind. Fruiting structures are needed to disperse spores, so do not harvest all caps in an area. As mentioned above, the use of an open mesh bag can also help spread spores and ensure continued availability of these delectable forest treats.

**Dandelion greens:** Dandelions, long considered a common weed, are extremely nutritious. The leaves of the plant are known to cleanse the liver and are sometimes used as a digestive aid.



**Habitat:** Any yard, field or disturbed plot of land where the sun shines through to the ground will likely yield dandelions.

**Identification:** Look for the heavily serrated leaves and distinctive rosette shape of the plant. Flower stems will yield a sticky white "milk" when broken. Leaves are bitter to the taste.

**Harvesting:** Just pick the leaves and put them in container! Greens are edible at all stages of the plant's life cycle (although they often are most palatable when they are young, and before the plant has flowered.)



**Flavor and preparation:** Dandelion greens are bitter, so be prepared. They can be eaten raw in salads, or steamed and eaten like spinach or any other leafy green. Boiling in salted water for 5 minutes will reduce bitterness. Once boiled, the greens can be sautéed. The addition of vinegar will also sometimes cut the bitter flavor.



**Sustainability:** Unlike the three wild foods above, dandelions are extremely common. **It is very**

**important to make certain that there has been no chemical contamination**, such as weed killer or fertilizer. You should also avoid harvesting any edible from the sides of roads, since they can be contaminated with heavy metals and other toxic substances.



**Disclaimer:** Although these are some of the safer and easier-to-identify wild edibles, it is crucial that any forager exercise caution, and never eat something if you are not certain that it is edible. There are many poisonous and toxic plants, and some of them look similar to edibles. If you are unsure, consult someone who is an experienced wildcrafter, or better yet, take a class! With proper precautions, foraging for wild edibles can provide inexpensive, delicious and healthy food for your plate.

**A note on collecting edibles on state lands:** Collection of wild edibles such as berries, leaves, nuts and mushrooms, for personal use, is permitted on state lands. Commercial-scale harvest is not permissible. A special use permit is required if the activity alters a site or alters/removes natural resources. This is the case any time soil is disturbed, or whole plants removed from the ground (such

as in the case of ramps). A special use permit can be requested by contacting a District Forest Manager (state forests) or Parks Regional Manager (state park lands).