

Living off the land

When I was but a wee lad, my friends and I would take off to the Colorado Mountains any chance we would get for the purpose of camping out.

Usually it meant that we finally wore down a parent so we could get a ride to the dropping off place. The whole idea of the trip was for us to practice our "living off the land" skills.

Being able to live off the land was very important to us. If you were truly self sufficient in the outdoors, it meant that no matter what happened in life, you could always fall deep into the mountains and survive. It was not that any of us would ever go off grid, it was the idea that we could if the need ever arose.

Say you got a bad report card (a regular occurrence for yours truly). Instead of heading home and facing the music, you could retreat to the high country and use your survival skills and live off the land, but alas I never did.

One important aspect of living off the land is the ability to identify edible plants and gather enough to satisfy the hunger pains in your stomach. I would like to point out, that the term "edible" does not necessarily mean good to eat. Edible simply means that if you ingest a certain amount of the "edible" plant, you won't wind up face down in your mashed potatoes.

If an "edible" plant was truly delicious, it would be wrapped in cellophane and sold for 5 bucks a pound at the grocery store. I would add that a number of edible plants are very tasty but many others are strong and bitter, requiring some boiling to make palatable.

In this column I have no intention, nor the room, to provide you with a catalog of all the edible plants in Colorado. There are hundreds of them, but be aware, there are just as many that could kill you or make you so sick you wish you were dead. Identifying and selecting edible plants is just another thing you can do to enhance your enjoyment of an outdoor trip.

My wife and I collect wild asparagus; raspberries, chokecherry and a few select other plants when we are out and about. Occasionally we have run into some wild mint or currants, and we collect a few handfuls to have with our supper.

It would be a good idea to pick up a few books about edible plants. There are hundreds of them available on-line, at the library or your favorite bookstore. A couple

Wild raspberries are among the easier wild berries to identify as safe to eat. (Amédée Masclé/Wikimedia Commons)



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

titles to consider would be the SAS SURVIVAL HANDBOOK or the U.S. ARMY SURVIVAL MANUAL. Both of these have detailed descriptions of what parts of a plant are edible, how to use them, and full descriptions of how to identify them.

There apps you can download on your smart phone that are complete books of edible plants. Some of these apps are free while others are available for a nominal cost. Having several on your phone makes for a great reference library that is easy to pack along with you.

As an example, Clovers (Trifolium) are edible and they are found just about anywhere. You can eat them raw but they taste better boiled. Another common plant that's edible is the Dandelion (Taraxacum officinale). The entire plant is edible—roots, leaves, and flower. You can eat them raw or boiled. The water you boiled them in can be drank as sort of a wild tea.

Berries are an area of special concern. Most berries that are red in color are poisonous, while most of the purple berries are edible. Be absolutely certain of what you pick. I stick to the known ones, like raspberries.

In the 1800s many fur trappers and pioneers of the Canadian wilderness perished from a disease known as scurvy. Scurvy is caused by a lack of vitamin C. During the harsh winters of the north, where all the ground was covered by many feet of snow, any plant was practically non-existent.

Most of the people lived on whatever they could hunt, which included a diet consisting largely of rabbits. Many of these people perished from scurvy. The sad fact is, all they had to do was munch down a small handful of pine needles, which were in abundance, and their lack of vitamin C would have been alleviated.

Hunting edible plants can also be a great family activity. The kids can go out and look for plants and bring them to camp for everyone to share. Again, make sure that whatever is collected and properly identified before consuming. Bringing the identification books along is a helpful idea.

I don't think anyone of us is going to resort to going off grid and living off the land, but learning to forage for edible plants



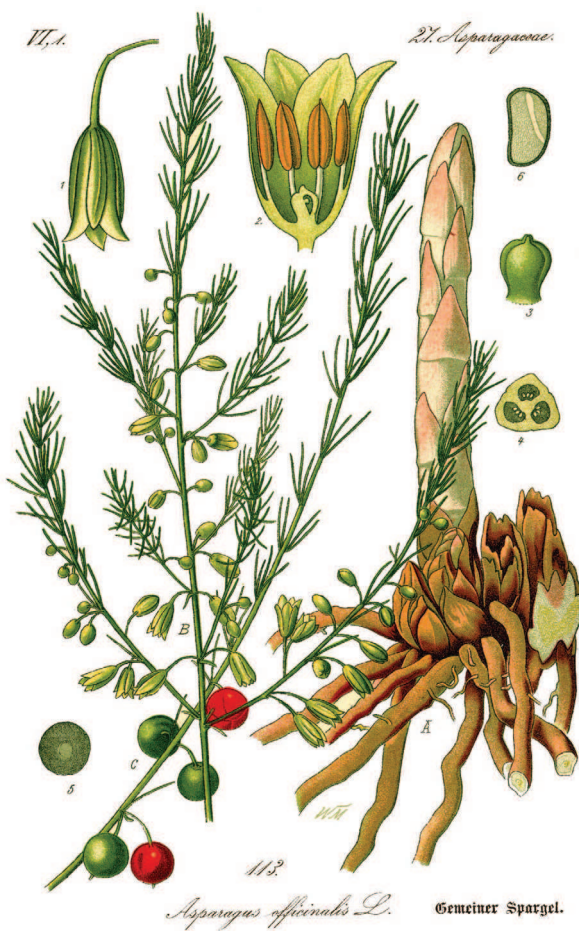
Dandelions are a nuisance for most people but in the wild they can provide sustenance as most all parts of the plant are edible. (Submitted photo/Mark Rackay)

is a useful outdoor skill that could help in a survival situation. Besides that, it is kind of fun to try something wild to eat when you are outdoors. Until next time, see you on the trail.

Mark Rackay is a freelance writer who serves as a director and public information officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

(Right) Wild asparagus isn't, in fact, wild – it's feral (i.e. escaped from the garden) and grows of its own accord across much of North America, according to honest-food.net. (CS Bibra/Wikimedia Commons)

(Bottom right) Wild mint often grows by waterways. The best way to find it is to follow your nose. (Franz Eugen Köhler/Wikimedia Commons)



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