

Edible plants abound around us



A very young milkweed pod.

Gus Steeves Photos



Dan Jaffe holds a vine of the groundnut plant, *Apios americanus*.

dubbed “the lawn of the future” – supports 87 pollinator species; the only herbaceous plant having more is goldenrod. Trees tend to support more species of various kinds overall, including insects, mammals and birds, with number one being the oaks and number two being the cherry species.

As Native Americans discovered long ago, acorns are edible and can be pounded into flour, although they require extensive boiling and leaching to eliminate their high tannin levels. Cherries are edible right off the tree; just dump the seed. Similarly, wild grapes (New England’s are called fox grapes, which were cultivated as Concord) are ubiquitous in our area. Jaffe said they “range from really tasty to pretty tasty to oh my that’s tart,” but when you find one you like, you can grow it from seed and it will maintain its flavor over generations. Doing so is easy, but “it does take a few years” to produce fruit.

“These grapes, you just plant and forget about them,” he said. Once they start fruiting, they’ll produce for about eight years, then you prune them and “harvest for another eight years.” Like many other plants, their leaves are also edible (as anyone who has had dolmas and other Greek fare knows), “but I don’t jump up and down about it,” he added.

Jaffe noted the leaves are often the most important part of a plant from an ecosystem perspective, while humans might favor the fruit. A case in point is the blueberry, which is the bush with the highest pollinator value. European honeybees can’t pollinate it, but many species of native bees and other insects can. They use what’s called “buzz pollination,” vibrating at a certain frequency to get the flowers to dump their pollen on them.

Not far from his blueberries was a stand of staghorn sumac, notable for its bright red, rather furry fruit clusters. Although it looks odd, it’s “extremely high in vitamin C; there’s more vitamin C in ‘rhus juice’ than in orange juice,” he said, noting the only thing having a higher vitamin C level is pine needles. They key, again, is to prepare it right – let it steep at room temperature for 30 minutes to 2 hours, testing occasionally until it’s at the taste you like. But don’t steep it too long, because after the lemonade-like flavor comes out, the tannins will soon follow.

Jaffe noted staghorn is safe, unlike its cousin, poison sumac. But they’re almost impossible to confuse; poison sumac only grows in marshy areas.

“If you’re not sinking in the mud, it’s not poison sumac,” he said.

Several edibles are far easier to overlook ... because they’re underground. One he highlighted is the innocuous small vine known as *Apios americanus*, aka the groundnut. It’s actually not a nut, but produces golfball-sized edible tubers in the autumn that can be used for anything you’d use a potato for. Jaffe said he feels it’s “one of the tastiest edibles,” and makes “by far the best fried chip.” He usually eats the bigger tubers and replants the small ones, meaning his groundnut crop rapidly goes “from a little to a heck of a lot.”

Of course, New England is also native to many real nuts, mostly on trees, and



Two walkers sample some lemon sorrel (*Oxalis stricta*).



Dan Jaffe plucks a bract from a hazelnut bush.



Dan Jaffe sows walkers one of the many kinds of mint that grow in New England: a narrow-leaved mountain mint. Although edible, he considers it the least tasty and weakest-smelling of the mint family.

Jaffe discussed three – hazelnut, black walnut and shagbark hickory. Hazelnuts take five to eight years to start producing nuts, but thereafter there will be “a war between you and the squirrels over who gets the nuts.” He has six of the short, bushy trees; four under nets for his family and two open for the wildlife.

“They’ll grow just about anywhere,” he added.

Black walnuts take somewhat longer, but require a lot of effort to open; their seeds are so thick people routinely run them over with cars to break into them. (One walk participant sad she knew of some birds who collected walnuts and dropped them in the street to do just that, swooping down to eat the nut meat after the cars had done their work for them.) Those trees are common backyard denizens, but are native to riverside areas, and he noted, “If you don’t like bleu cheese, you’re not going to like black walnuts.”

Shagbarks, by contrast are somewhat easier to crack, but take far longer to produce – nearly 30 years.

“If you want to plant a shagbark hickory, your grandchildren will be eating the nuts,”

he said, noting some argue it’s “the tastiest nut in the world.”

Among other things, Jaffe also pinpointed several members of the mint family, including spearmint, peppermint and anise hyssop (which smells like licorice). He said he recommends the latter for gardens because it will overgrow a lot of weeds. Additionally, he discussed lemon sorrel, a very common garden weed with yellow flowers that tastes like lemon. Some sources claim it’s poisonous because it contains oxalic acid, but harm will come only if you eat nearly 16 pounds of it. The common culinary herb cilantro (aka coriander) has twice as much oxalic acid in it, he noted.

He didn’t mention one common edible weed that also contains some oxalic acid: lamb’s quarter (aka white goosefoot or pigweed). Wikipedia notes it was once cultivated by Native Americans, is still commonly grown in India, and “now occurs almost everywhere (even, apparently in Antarctica) in soils rich in nitrogen, especially on wasteland.”

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BY GUS STEEVES
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HOLLAND — Your backyard and the forest nearby have a wide range of edible plants, many of them commonly called weeds.

That’s the basic message horticulturist Dan Jaffe imparted to a few dozen people last week. During a short tour of Norcross Wildlife Sanctuary’s gardens, he pointed out a wide range of edible native plants, and some of them might surprise you.

One of the more common, and most avoided due to misidentification, is milkweed. Jaffe said that has the reputation of being poisonous, but actually is “really quite tasty” if prepared properly.

The danger is that young milkweed can be confused with dogbane, which is toxic, and that many other species having milky sap are in fact toxic. Jaffe said milkweed sap “glues the mouthparts of most insects shut.”

Despite that, several parts of

milkweed are edible, especially if collected early, but they first require blanching (brief immersion in boiling water, followed by immersion in cold water). To Jaffe, two of the best are “the nice tight green flower bud” before it expands, which is “sometimes called wild broccoli,” and the smallest stage of its famous pods before they become big and fibrous, which he sees as “a good cheese alternative.”

“It’s really easy to get large amounts of them,” because milkweed is so common, he noted. But it’s also crucial for monarch butterflies and a few other insects, so harvesters should make a point of leaving most of the milkweed in any field intact.

Indeed, a key part of Jaffe’s talk looked at how often native plants we can eat are also important to other species. “If nothing is eating your plants, your garden has no ecosystem value,” Jaffe said.

Wild strawberry – which he



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