

Summer's wild edibles

BY HOLLY BELLEBUONO AND CATHERINE WALTHERS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RANDI BAIRD

2 in a 3-part series



Our series on the variety of foods and ingredients you can find on the Island – in your backyard, in fields, in forests, and on beaches – continues with summer's tasty treats. Plus recipes for rose-hip soup, a salad with fresh raspberries, and sumac lemonade.

While you're enjoying the beach and the sun, be sure to include nature's summer bounty in your day. It's easy to locate and harvest many useful wild plants on the Vineyard, and even easier to make delicious food and drinks with them. Here are the descriptions you need to find tasty flowers and nutritious greens to go with every meal of the day.

Beach peas

In the spring, the beach pea plant (*Lathyrus maritimus*) has beautiful purple or fuchsia flowers amid the pale green leaves. If you look at the same plants again in July and August, you'll often see hanging pods (similar to common garden pea pods) with three to eight small peas inside. Since the peas are under-sized, it might take too much time to collect for a meal, but they taste like regular peas and can be eaten and cooked in the same way. Beach pea tendrils, located at the tip of the plant, can be snipped and lightly steamed. Look for the beach peas on both the south- and north-shore beaches, in the dunes and around

Writer Holly Bellebuono and her daughter, Madia, collect wild roses that were likely once cultivated. Like those of *Rosa rugosa*, the petals can be gathered to make tea or syrup, or to sprinkle on a fruit salad.



Beach peas

high-tide marks, or along beach paths. Collecting the peas is a good activity for kids inclined toward foraging.

Blackberry (see raspberry)

Burdock and yellow dock

Burdock (*Arctium lappa*) leaves are silvery green, wide, and wavy; its cousin yellow dock (*Rumex crispus*) has long, narrow, and often speckled, reddish-brown leaves. While they look different, they are generally found growing in the same poor- to medium-quality soil (such as along roadsides and yard edges) and the roots are



Burdock and yellow dock, displayed by Holly Bellebuono.

used in a similar manner: chopped and eaten in stir-fries, or soaked in vinegar to create a mineral-rich salad dressing. Their roots, which are quite difficult to dig up but well worth it, are valuable sources of iron. (See recipe for a homemade vinegar on page 65.)

Cat brier

The trails throughout up-Island are rampant by mid-summer with a looping, climbing vine that leans out into the path with tiny twisting tips. This is cat brier (*Smilax rotundifolia*). As the species name implies, the leaves are rounded; they are leathery and slightly heart-shaped, coming to a point at the tip. Those swaying tips that reach out to brush against you as you hike the trail are actually edible, and the last three inches of the tips make a succulent, crunchy addition to salads. The small flowers elsewhere on the plant are nondescript and not edible, and in the fall they put forth tiny, blue berries that are also not edible. Cat brier is considered an emergency food – useful to know if you are ever lost.

Irish moss

Irish moss seaweed can be found on many New England shores and is a red algae. The fronds are generally three to six inches long and sport a deep reddish-purple or green color. These forked and curled fronds grow in clusters, and have no sacks on them like you see on bladder

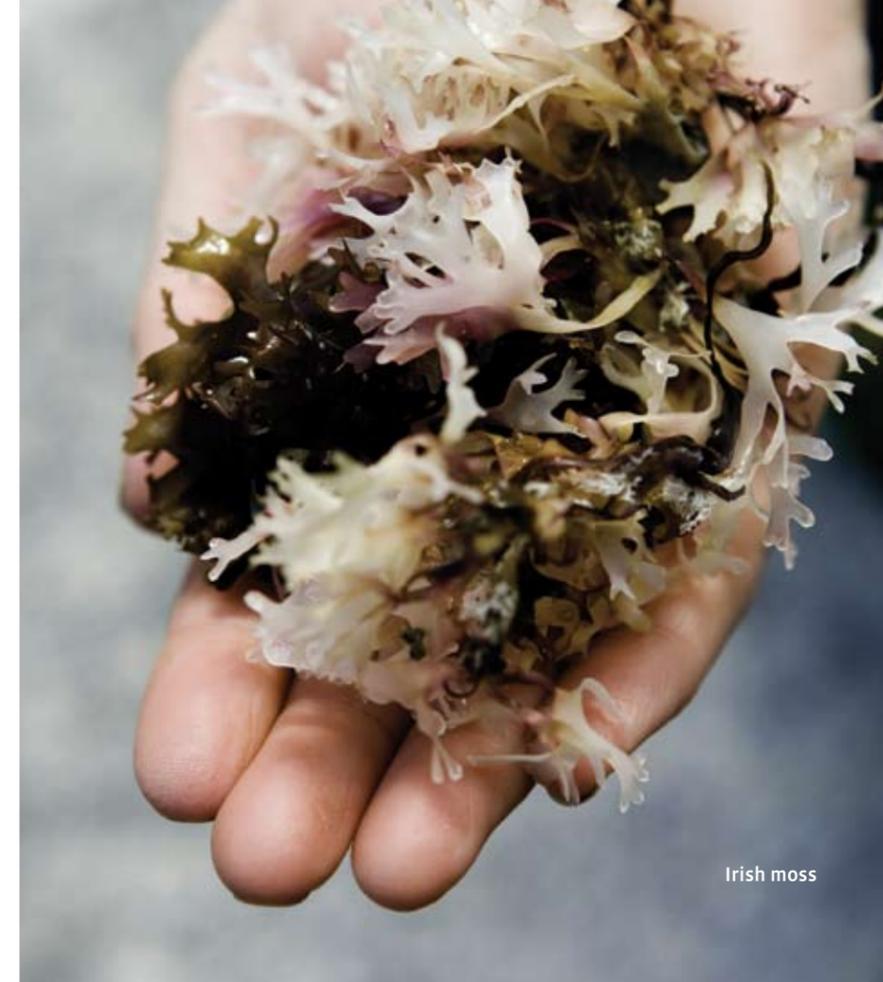
wrack. (Other seaweeds are edible, by the way, but bladder wrack is not as tasty.) Irish moss (*Chondrus crispus*) contains carrageenan and is used commercially as a thickener as it has the wonderful ability to make liquids gel. Many foods can benefit from a little nutritious Irish moss added in: soups, puddings, chilled salads. There's even a recipe for Irish moss lemonade in *A Foraging Vacation: Edibles from Maine's Sea and Shore* by Raquel Boehmer (Down East Books, 1982). The best way to experiment with Irish moss is to gather it fresh and dry it on large screens – outdoors in shade or indoors in a well-ventilated space or even in an oven on very low heat. Once all the water is gone, store it in sealed bags. When ready to use, shake the seaweed to remove excess sand, and reconstitute by washing in several changes of water before cooking it. Or, if using fresh plants, wash in several changes of water and simmer on low heat in whatever recipe you choose (the plant must be cooked prior to eating it). Small amounts are generally called for.

QUICK RECIPE: Irish moss pudding

To make pudding, use a 1/2 cup of fresh Irish moss to set a quart of milk. Wash the seaweed in cold water for 10 minutes before placing it in cheesecloth that you suspend in the milk. Simmer for 30 minutes. Squeeze the cheesecloth to release



Cat brier



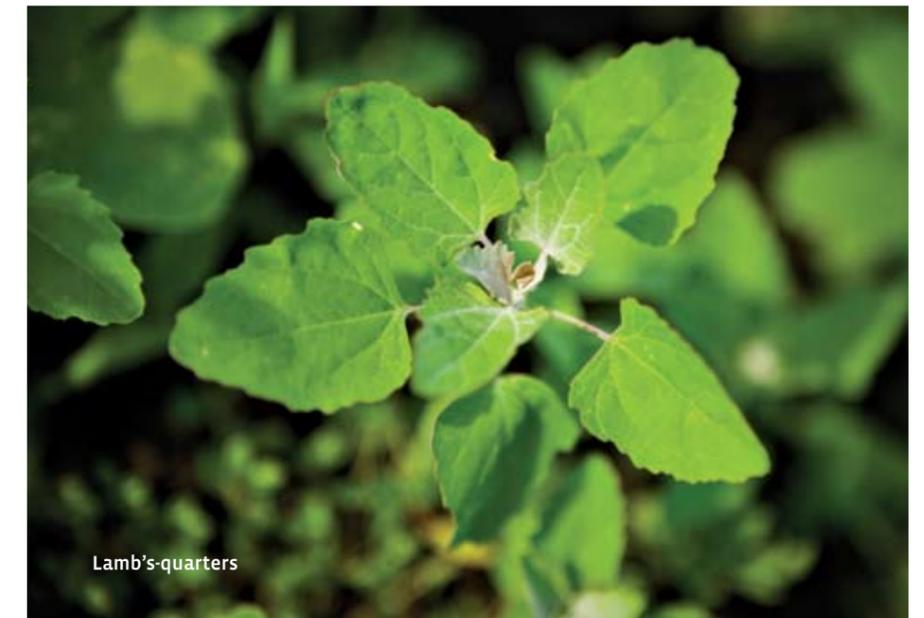
Irish moss

the carrageenan before removing it from the milk. Add a 1/2 cup brown sugar, 1 teaspoon vanilla, a pinch of salt, and a pinch of nutmeg, cocoa, or coffee for flavor. Pour into bowls and chill for 1 hour.

Lamb's-quarters

Nearly every garden on the Vineyard sprouts lamb's-quarters (*Chenopodium album*), which, if given the chance, can provide many meals. In your garden or anywhere the soil is disturbed, look for silvery green plants with serrated leaves growing alternately up the stem; upper leaves are smooth and the entire plant has a mealy, dusty appearance. This "dust" will rub off on your fingertips and sparkle like silver, though it in no way affects the flavor or safety of this valuable wild food. The leaves are delicious and nutty eaten raw, or they can be steamed as a vegetable. Some people boil them, but this can make them slimy and disagreeable. Raw, however, they provide the same nutritional content as spinach. Later in the season, as lamb's-quarter

grows to six feet or taller and has developed tiny brown seed clusters, harvest the seeds; these are highly nutritious and can be used in a variety of ways: Sprinkle them on your oatmeal; use them as you



Lamb's-quarters

would TVP (textured vegetable protein) in stir-fries; mix them with hamburger or turkey meat for your burgers; or grind them in a mill to the consistency of flour, and use in a one-to-one ratio with your normal wheat flour. This vital plant is all-too-often pulled out as a weed; instead, put it to use all season long.

Purslane

Fat, juicy leaves are often neglected when choosing wild foods, but they are prized among those who seek mild tasty treats. Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*) often grows in gardens and in shady, cultivated places, and it is a creeper, so look for it spreading out among the vegetables or landscaping plants. It often shows one yellow flower near the top. The entire leaf is succulent and can be added whole to many raw dishes. This is one of those plants that is nice to snip, here and there as you work, to add to salads at mealtime, because the rounded, fat leaves add a sweet crunch. Many foragers harvest the nutritious leaves, but the stem can be eaten too, usually pickled, and the seeds can be ground to flour. (The seeds form just behind the flower, in the leaf cluster; they can be harvested after the flowers have dropped away, and hung in bunches in a paper bag to encourage ripening.) Chilmark gardener Elizabeth Gude likes using purslane and lamb's-quarters as



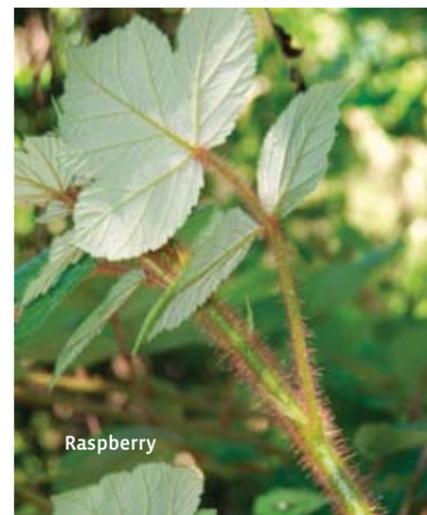
Purslane

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wild herbs for her salads. “Eat them raw,” she says. “Steaming them makes them lose their crunch, but raw they keep their texture and are delightful.”

Raspberry (and blackberry)

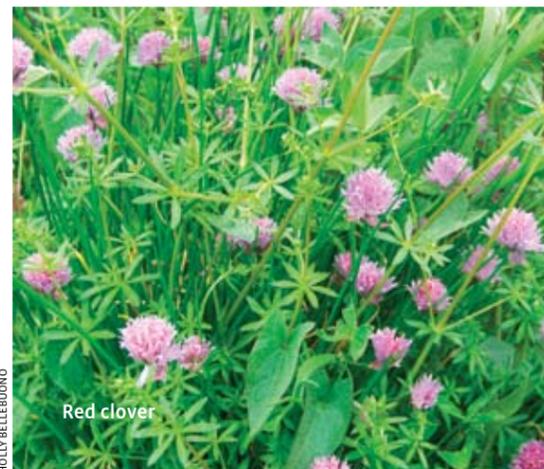
All children know raspberries: those thimble-shaped, red sweet-tarts that grow on thorny branches. There is a quick trick to tell, before the fruit appears, if the branch is a raspberry or a blackberry (both *Rubus* spp.): Raspberry canes are bluish, while blackberry canes are green. Raspberry leaves also sport a soft green color on the upper side, but they are a bright silver underneath. Eat the berries of the second-year canes,



Raspberry

HOLLY BELLEBUONO

but don't neglect the leaves of the first year canes, which make a wonderfully nourishing tea. This tea has been valued by midwives for centuries for toning the uterus during pregnancy (these days there is some controversy about using it in the first trimester), but anyone can drink it. Extremely high in calcium, raspberry leaf tea has an astringent taste; if you enjoy dry bitter teas such as Earl Grey, you'll likely enjoy raspberry leaf tea. Gather a handful of leaves at the same time you harvest some red clover and you'll be able to serve a nutritious and naturally sweet tea within ten minutes. Raspberry and blackberry roots have been used medicinally for centuries as strong



Red clover

HOLLY BELLEBUONO

astringents, useful for dysentery and cleansing. (See recipe for arugula salad with fresh raspberries and balls of goat cheese and walnuts on page 64.)

Red clover

If you are fortunate enough to participate in Whippoorwill Farm, the Island's community-supported agriculture program, be sure to notice all the red clover (*Trifolium pratense*) blossoms at the farm. Look for the fat, pinkish-red, globe-shaped blossoms atop a tall hairless stalk; just below the flower sit three clover-shaped leaves. Harvest the entire top, which includes the flower and the leaves directly beneath it to a depth of two to three inches, to make a tea that is so mineral-rich many herbalists consider it a fertility

edible berries. The sumac trees with feathery leaves that turn a noticeable crimson in the fall can typically be found at the edges of open fields, or around farms or abandoned lots.

According to Linsey Lee, a West Tisbury resident and author of *Edible Wild Plants of Martha's Vineyard* (originally published in 1975 by Vineyard Conservation Society), there is little danger of confusing edible sumac with poison sumac. Poison sumac, she says, bears white berries in drooping clusters – as opposed to the red, upright clusters of berries of the edible sumac – and is relatively uncommon. (The dried red berries from another variety of sumac, *Rhus*

tonic. Valued for its ability to heal eczema in children, as well as to treat bronchitis and whooping cough, red-clover tea can also be drunk by anyone who wants to enjoy its naturally sweet, honey flavor. Gardeners plant this member of the legume family, since the roots fix nitrogen in the soil. Marie Scott, a forager and farmer who grew up on the Vineyard and now winters in Vermont, gathers red-clover tops all season and blends them with nettle (that she harvests in the spring), horsetail (that she finds along the cliffs of Vineyard beaches), and raspberry leaves; she combines them for a calcium- and silica-rich bone-strengthening tea. “While I'm at it,” she says, “I'll throw in some peppermint and ginger” for a flavorful brew. “A naturopath initially gave me the tea, but I realized I could harvest many of the herbs myself.” To prepare the tea, boil the blossoms and leaves in water, steep for ten minutes, and strain.

Roses

Many people think of Aquinnah and Oak Bluffs for their fantastic displays of wild roses; these are ready to harvest right now, and not only for your flower vase. Roses are useful medicinally for our bodies and the petals are tasty as food. And not just those large, golf-ball-sized rose hips of *Rosa rugosa*, but in fact any rose species can be harvested for its hips, which are high in tannin, pectin,

carotene, fruit acids, and fatty oil, and are prized for their high content of vitamin C. Chop the hips and cover with boiling water to brew a zesty tea, or remove the seeds and hairs to make a heavenly syrup to pour on pancakes, éclairs, and even frittatas. Brew a handful of rose petals for a delicate, calming tea that goes beautifully with afternoon sugar cookies, or use them to make a syrup (much milder than hip syrup). The fragrant rose petals can also be sprinkled on fruit salads or dipped in a light sugar syrup, laid flat, and allowed to dry to make delicious



Roses

candies. For a delectable brunch, include some of these unique candies in your next batch of homemade granola, add yogurt, and top it off with fresh fruit and rose-hip syrup. Gather the rose petals from an area where you know they have not been sprayed with chemicals. (See recipe for rose-hip soup on page 64.)

The first installment in this series is on our website, www.mvmagazine.com. It features items in spring that may grow throughout the season, and a reading list. Part three, in the September-October magazine, will cover fall edibles.

Fun with food: Sumac

It's kind of cool, literally, to make pink lemonade on a hot summer day from a wild plant.

Technically, it's called “sumac-ade,” since we're using summer sumac berries from the small trees where these upright clusters of red berries are found. The drink is also referred to as Indian lemonade. Both Native Americans and early colonists used this native plant to create the same drink hundreds of years ago.

On the Island, we find two varieties of sumac, scarlet sumac (*Rhus glabra*) and dwarf sumac (*Rhus copallina*), both with

coriaria found in the Middle East, are used throughout that region in cooking to impart a fruity, lemony flavor.)

The berries of scarlet and dwarf sumac begin to ripen in August, and many foraging experts suggest harvesting the clusters as soon as they turn red, rather than later when they can attract insects or lose their flavor. They also suggest not picking directly after a rainstorm, because the water will temporarily wash away the malic acid, ascorbic acid, and tannic acid, all flavorings found on the outside of the berries. Boston-area foraging expert Russ Cohen has a method for checking to see if the sumac berry is ready: Lick your finger, jam it into

the cluster, and then lick it again; if it tastes pleasant and lemony, he says, the berries are ready for use.

Making a refreshing, tart drink full of vitamin C from sumac-berry clusters may be easier than making traditional lemonade, which requires plenty of squeezing and juicing. It simply entails steeping the clusters in water until pleasantly sour and red in color.

Sumac-ade

There are different ways to prepare this, but many suggest not pouring boiling water over the clusters, because that tends to leach out too much tannic acid and the results can

become bitter. Also, the berries are covered in fine hairs, so filtering through cheesecloth works better than a typical strainer.

- 1 gallon cool or cold water
- 10 to 12 clusters of sumac berries
- Island honey, maple syrup, or sugar to taste

1. Place water in a large pot, add the berry clusters and gently break them apart with your hands. Let the berries steep at room temperature or in the sun, submerged, for several hours or overnight.

2. Remove the berries, and strain the liquid through cheesecloth or a coffee filter. Sweeten to taste, and serve over ice.



Summer wild edibles recipes

Arugula salad with fresh raspberries and balls of goat cheese and walnuts

Peppery, dark green arugula, fresh from the farmer's market, along with pale green lettuce leaves and sweet-tart fresh raspberries is a refreshing change from other everyday salads. Wild blackberries or blueberries can also be added or substituted for raspberries.

Serves 4

- 6 cups baby arugula, rinsed and dried
- 1 small head of bibb or Boston lettuce, torn into bite-sized pieces (about 2 cups)
- 6 ounces goat cheese
- 1/3 cup walnuts, toasted for 5 minutes in a 350-degree oven
- Honey-raspberry balsamic vinaigrette, recipe follows
- 1 cup fresh raspberries

1. In a wide salad bowl, combine the arugula and lettuce.

2. With your hands (and some disposable plastic gloves if handy), roll the goat cheese into small balls, approximately 1/2-inch in diameter, and place on a piece of wax or parchment paper on a plate. Place walnuts in a food processor and pulse to finely chop. Place chopped walnuts on a plate and roll the goat cheese balls to completely cover, pressing to get a nice coating of walnuts. Place the cheese balls back on the wax or parchment paper and refrigerate, covered in plastic wrap, until ready to serve the salad.

3. Before serving, add just enough vinaigrette to coat the leaves, and mix well. (Reserve leftover dressing for another salad.) Top with raspberries and walnut-cheese balls.

HONEY-RASPBERRY BALSAMIC VINAIGRETTE

- 3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 6 raspberries
- 2 to 3 teaspoons Island honey

- 2 teaspoons minced shallot
- 1/2 cup olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste

1. In a food processor, add the vinegar, raspberries, honey, and shallot, and blend for a few seconds. Add in the oil, salt, and pepper to taste and pulse two or three times to combine.

Rose-hip soup

The Martha's Vineyard Cookbook by Louise Tate King and Jean Stewart Wexler, originally published in 1971 and re-released last year in its fourth edition (Globe Pequot Press), has a chapter dedicated to wild foods. In the spirit of delectable fruit soups, this one uses a wild fruit available in the summer season to anyone on Martha's Vineyard who seeks it out. Dressed up with sour cream and a bit of nutmeg, this rose-hip soup makes an elegant first course.

Serves 4

- 3 cups rose hips
- 6 cups water
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 1 tablespoon water
- 2 teaspoons lemon juice
- 1/2 teaspoon grated lemon rind
- 1/2 teaspoon powdered ginger
- 4 tablespoons sour cream
- More ginger or nutmeg, to garnish

1. Pick over rose hips, using only fully ripened fruit for measuring. Rinse well; remove stem and bud ends. In a 2-quart saucepan, combine rose hips and water, bring to a boil, and cook over moderate heat for 25 minutes (do not boil too fast or too much water will evaporate). Let fruit cool slightly, then put through a food mill. Measure pulp; if necessary, add enough water to make 3 cups puréed fruit.

2. Put pulp in a smaller saucepan, add sugar, stir well, and bring to a low boil. Mix the cornstarch and 1 tablespoon water thoroughly, and stir slowly into fruit mixture. Continue to stir slowly until mixture comes to a low boil again. Cook, still at reduced heat, about 2 minutes, until soup thickens evenly. Turn off heat; stir in lemon juice, rind, and ginger. Let soup cool, then refrigerate until well chilled.

3. To serve, top each portion with a tablespoon of sour cream and a dash of ginger or grated nutmeg.

Yellow dock and burdock vinegar

This mineral-rich vinegar can be sprinkled on steamed greens and vegetables, or mixed with oil to make a salad dressing. Use as much parsley and herbs as you like; parsley is included, because like the roots, it is also high in iron.

Makes 3 cups

- 1 yellow dock root, 5 to 7 inches in length
- 1 burdock root, 5 to 8 inches in length
- 3 cups apple cider vinegar
- 2 tablespoons honey
- Parsley
- Fresh herbs as desired: basil, oregano, rosemary, all chopped

1. Thoroughly wash the roots and chop into tiny pieces. Rinse again. Place chopped roots into a (non-aluminum, preferably glass) quart jar.

2. Heat vinegar to lightly simmering and pour onto roots. Add honey, parsley, and any other herbs, and cap tightly. Keep in mind that vinegar may rust the lid; keep the jar on a dish in case of any oozing overflow and shake it daily for 1 to 4 weeks. The longer it steeps, the more iron is infused into the vinegar.

3. Strain through cheesecloth or a strainer and return vinegar to jar. ♦



Rose hips

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