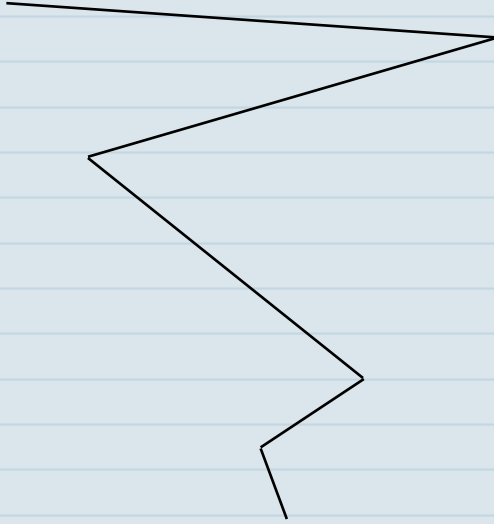


# Wild Edible NoteBook

# June



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## We Gorged Ourselves on Goosefoot

**G**oosefoot, aka lamb's quarters, wild spinach, and pigweed, is said to be one of the most popular among wild edible plants, particularly when it comes to the uninitiate.

As "Wildman" Steve Brill and Evelyn Dean put it: "If you begin learning wild foods with only a few plants...this widely distributed, easy-to-identify, tasty, nutritious, long-in-season plant should be one of the first on your list."

I don't always tend to do things in the right order, so as it turns out, goosefoot ended up being more like #50 on my list. But boy, what a #50 it was!

The opportunity to try it for the first time came about last week when Gregg and I visited his brother-in-law in Fort Collins, Colorado for an early birthday celebration. Steve was out back mowing the lawn for a much-hoped-for badminton tournament when we arrived. I quickly surveyed the small, fenced-in enclosure to find, much to my pleasant surprise, hundreds of lamb's quarter plants in various stages of growth. "I thought they were pretty so I didn't weed them out," commented Steve, who is charged with the lawn care. Now that's a good man!

While Gregg and Steve battled it out on the slippery badminton field in the light rain, I foraged for goosefoot in the flower beds along the edges of his lawn, snipping the tops and individual leaves off tall plants and taking the small plants (8 inches in height or less) in their entirety. When the rain started coming down harder we went inside and I spent the better part of an hour meticulously washing and trimming leaves and stems.

"Those are going to be the cleanest lamb's quarters ever eaten," Steve commented from the living room, where he and Gregg had moved on to Wii



*Lambs quarters, aka goosefoot, coming up under the rose bush in Steve's back yard.*

badminton. So I go a little overboard sometimes. What can I say?

"It tastes like its relative, spinach ...only better," Brill writes in *Identifying and Harvesting Edible and Medicinal Plants*. "However, it shrinks by about two thirds when you cook it, so be sure to collect enough."

Later that evening, when the pork was just about done and the potatoes were coming off the grill, I followed Mr. Brill's suggestion and faithfully stuffed what I thought to be a gargantuan quantity of lamb's quarters into a pan. I dashed it with olive oil, salted the leaves lightly, and cooked for a couple of minutes until the leaves wilted before adding a cup of water, covering, steaming for 7 minutes, draining, and sprinkling with soy sauce. What started out as about 8 cups of plant parts cooked down to about 2 cups. You do the math.

The goosefoot turned out to be a big hit with the boys. "Do you mind?" Steve asked me at dinner, looking a little sheepish, as he went for a second serving before he had even finished the first. "I think I like it better than spinach—and I love spinach."

"I think this might be the best wild edible plant we've had yet," Gregg announced at the end of dinner, pushing his cleaned plate away and patting his belly with satisfaction.



*The leaves of some lamb's quarters are whitish on the underside, like those pictured in this photo.*

## Antiquated Nutrient Comparison

In *Common Edible and Medicinal Plants of Colorado*, the Marchs cite U.S. Agricultural Handbook #8 (the closest reference I could find to this after a brief search was Handbook #8-1, published in 1979) in their comparison of the nutrients in "goosefoot" with selected commercial vegetables:

- Protein in goosefoot: 19.1 grams protein/lb
- Protein in spinach: 13.4 grams protein/lb
- Vitamin A in goosefoot: 52,620 international units (?)/lb
- Vitamin A in spinach: 33,800 international units/lb

Obviously this data should be taken with a grain of salt for several reasons. First, the numbers are from a study that seems to have been published in 1979. Second, "goosefoot" is a common name and could refer to any number of edible *Chenopodium* species. Third, a USDA study showed that the nutritional quality of 43 commercial vegetables has declined significantly since 1950 (see *In Defense of Food* by Michael Pollan), meaning that the nutritional quality of goosefoot might now be even greater than the veggies listed. But I include the stats to show only that goosefoot might be very good for you, indeed.

## Edible Species of Goosefoot and a Wee Bit of Confusion Over Common Names

Of the edible species of *Chenopodium*, Samuel Thayer states in *The Forager's Harvest: A Guide to Identifying, Harvesting, and Preparing Edible Wild Plants* that *C. album* is the most abundant, and also the one to which the monikers "lamb's quarter" and "goosefoot" are applied. Later, however, he makes a distinction between the two common names when he explains that the also-edible eastern variety, *C. hybridum* or *C. simplex*, aka "maple-leaved goosefoot," has larger, darker leaves than lamb's quarters. This confused me, as I have always seen the same common names used interchangeably—which is why, in the end, scientific names are superior to common names. For the purpose of this entry, however, I will refer to all of the similar, edible *Chenopodiums* by any and all of the above common names.

Aside from *C. album* and *C. hybridum*, Thayer lists some of the other edible varieties of *Chenopodium*: *C. capitatum* (Rockies and parts north), *C. fremontii* (west), and *C. berlandieri*, among others. (For more information, pick up a copy of *The Forager's Harvest*.)



*Lamb's quarters cooks down a lot, so be sure to gather a large quantity if you hope to eat it as a dish unto itself.*

In *Best-Tasting Wild Plants of Colorado and the Rockies*, Cattail Bob Seebeck describes the leaves of three edible species of *Chenopodium* as “goose-foot shaped” (go figure) with “lighter coloration on new growth at the tip,” and often with red stripes on the stem. Some varieties have a whitish powder on the underside of the leaf. (Aside from that, please refer to the pictures and your plant guides for positive identification). Bob advises staying away from “rank smelling or bad-tasting *Chenopodium* members,” as not every plant in the genus is edible. Personally, I don’t like eating smelly or gross things, so it seems like a good rule of thumb to me.

The wild edible plants experts have a few cautionary notes when it comes to grazing on goosefoot. Even with edible varieties, Cattail Bob warns that “like spinach, eating large quantities of lambs quarter may produce mild oxalate/nitrate poisoning.” Brill explains that lamb’s quarters can absorb nitrates from contaminated soil and make you sick, so it’s best to be careful where you forage. Thayer points out that if you are one of those people who experience mild irritation on the tongue with spinach (as he does), then the same will most likely be the case with lamb’s quarters, so you might just want to add it to a stir fry instead of eating a full dish by its lonesome.

As far as Gregg, Steve, and I are concerned, not one of us was noticeably poisoned, got sick, or even experienced irritated tongues. We did all share a funny sensation on our teeth afterwards, described by Steve as “sticky” and by Gregg as “very clean.” I would use the word “squeaky” myself. Steve says that spinach does the same thing to his teeth.

## Goosefoot Eaters

Years ago, as an archaeology student at Bard College in upstate New York, I learned that Native American people ate goosefoot in the Northeast for thousands of years, as evidenced by carbon-dated, charred plant remains. Later, I read in more than one wild edible plants guide that European settlers were responsible for introducing goosefoot to North America. As you can imagine, this caused me some amount of cognitive dissonance.

And then, thankfully, I picked up Samuel Thayer’s book, in which he debunks the introduced-species-argument as it pertains to *Chenopodium* using archeological evidence, concluding colorfully: “Apparently, like stinging nettle, black nightshade, human beings, and other cosmopolitan weeds, this species was indeed brought from Europe, but to a continent that already had its own indigenous strain.” I can’t tell you how much better I feel now.



## Not To Be Confused with Goose Feet

Last year when I was first getting back into this whole wild edible plants thing, I found a recipe for “Noodle and Goosefoot Casserole” in *Common Edible and Medicinal Plants of Colorado*. “That sounds awful,” Gregg replied to my eager prattle, not yet convinced on the whole wild food thing, the thought of actual goose feet baked in of copious amounts of cheese no doubt etching a painful image into his mind.

As I said before, Gregg has since been fully converted, but it does tickle the funny bone to picture the scene in retrospect. And that, in turn, makes me to think about which of my unwitting friends plans to visit next... because goosefoot casserole does sound like an entertaining choice of meals to serve should the occasion present itself.



*Young goosefoots (pluralizing to goosefeet just didn't seem to make sense) can be eaten leaves, stems and all.*

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## Roadside Cow Parsnip Boiled in Tap Water!

The other day I wrote about fireweed, the wild edible plant that Gregory Tilford chose to honor by adorning the front cover of his book with it. Earning a similar distinction on the cover of Kathryn G. and Andrew L. March's 1979 guide, *Common Edible and Medicinal Plants of Colorado with Recipes and Prescriptions*, is cow parsnip, a plant that shares its classification in the Umbelliferae family with regular parsnip, carrots, parsley, dill, coriander, fennel, and anise.



*Unfurling cow parsnip leaves are a wild, woolly delicacy.*

"The fresh young shoots and the first leaves, just as they are unfolding, are a most exotic, wild and woolly, stimulating taste, a bold stroke to mark off the mid-spring and early summer season," the Marchs write. "The flavor is one of a kind, with at most distant echoes of fresh coriander, strange at first but one comes to crave it."

After reading that, I had to have some.

There was only one catch. The Umbelliferae family comes with strong warnings from the wild foods literature on account of some extremely toxic family members, including poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) and water hemlocks (*Cicuta* genus) which also sport the large white umbrella-shaped umbels of tiny flowers for which the family is named. Unlike its poisonous cousins, cow parsnip (*Heracleum maximum*) has big, maple-leaf-shaped leaves. Similar to them, however, the mature plant features a tall stalk with big flower heads that look something like Queen Anne's Lace.

The poison-risk-factor is why finding the new shoots and leaves of cow parsnip ended up becoming a two year process for Gregg and me. Last



*Mature roadside cow parsnip, summer 2009*

summer we identified the mature plants, making absolutely certain of our identification with the aid of numerous guide books. We remembered where the plants were located and returned this year to find the young shoots and leaves, often alongside the tall, dry stalks of last year's flowers.

We tasted our first cow parsnip a few days ago following a recipe in the Marchs' book that calls for boiling the plant parts for 10 minutes, changing the water, boiling for another ten minutes, and then adding soy sauce, butter, and chopped onions.

It was a unique taste, to say the least. I don't know what fresh coriander tastes like, but cow parsnip tastes like nothing I've ever tasted before. Gregg opined that the raw onions were key to the recipe. I swear I've never seen this in the two years that we've known each other, but Gregg—the supposed onion-hater—got up and helped himself to a second serving of raw onions.

All in all, the cow parsnip was good. Weird, but good.

## Finding the Cow Parsnip

Today, after meeting with my bank-provided financial advisor on how on earth I am going to make a proper living as a freelance writer/snowboard bum, I stopped by a less-than-wild roadside spot where we had seen mature cow parsnip the year before.

Sure enough, I spotted the big maple-shaped leaves out the passenger window, so I pulled into a convenient nook and parked the car. There was not

a soul in sight and I headed down the steep embankment to snip a couple of small, fuzzy leaves and stems, filling a small bag after 15 minutes. I have to admit that the spot might have been a bit too close to the road for comfort (roads = pollution on your plants) if it weren't for the fact that it seemed so little trodden. Afterwards I climbed back up, took my wild booty to the car, and drove up the street for round two of the adventure.

My plan was to explore a swollen spring stream in a section of national forest, since a recent call to the ranger station revealed that I can sustainably forage small amounts of plants for personal use in the Pike and San Isabel National Forests. I parked the car, grabbed my scissors and bags, and followed the stream up on its darker, forested side, thinking all the while that the tangled mass of willows and undergrowth on the other side might be a better spot for cow parsnip. When the opportunity presented itself, I crossed and pushed my way into the underbrush on the other side.

Sure enough, it was a veritable jackpot of cow parsnip!

According to knowledge gleaned from the Marchs' book, the foraging of cow parsnip involves taking small, fuzzy, leaves—both those which are not quite unfurling and those which are just starting to unfurl, succulent stems and all. I stuck to the Marchs' suggestion to harvest "plants no higher than 6 inches," staying on the willowy side of the stream while following it back roughly in the direction from which I'd come.



*Young cow parsnip leaves, unfurling.*





*Young cow parsnip, aka *Heracleum maximum*, by the stream.*

You have to keep an eye out for it, but once you start to recognize the big, maple-shaped leaves, cow parsnip is fairly easy to spot. The yummy new growth is underneath the big leaves. When you cut a stem, there is a distinctive “wild” and “woolly” aroma. Also, heed this word of caution from “Wildman” Steve Brill and Evelyn Dean (1994): “Touching the plant in conjunction with sunlight and wet, sweaty skin may give sensitive people rashes.”

The tangled side of the stream ended up being a trail of cow parsnip from start to finish. Even though I only harvested new leaves, one or two per plant, I was still able to get a healthy serving for two. Unfortunately, just as should have been arriving at the car, I came upon a house in the middle of the forest. Yikes! I doubled back quickly, afraid I had strayed onto private land.

That’s when I spied a jaunty older couple coming down a path from somewhere up above—she with a walking stick, and he carrying a good-sized rock. “Oh, do you know if we’re on public land?” I asked, surprised to see them there. Well, my false alarm led to another discovery—an old mining road that doubles as a popular hiking trail. Tee hee. So I walked with the nice couple past the house that had startled me. I showed them cow parsnip and they told me they were on vacation from Minnesota. How nice!

## Cooking the Cow Parsnip

Our tap water at home—which is usually clean and clear—is now silty. I don't know if we used too much water or our neighbors used too much water, but we've changed the filter once already and the water is still a light gray mud color. When I got home, Gregg was already on his way down to Boulder and then Longmont to hash up web design plans and teach kids to skateboard, respectively. So I was on my own for lunch, and veggie burgers with a side of cow parsnip sounded perfect. I decided to start with the "roadside" batch and save the more pristine forest parsnip for Gregg to try. Here's what I did:

1. Set a pot of silty tap water to boil.
2. Clean sink and fill with enough siltwater to cover roadside cow parsnip.
3. Wash plant parts thoroughly to remove dust and road chemicals (very, very well, in other words).
4. Boil in silty tap water for 10 minutes and strain.
5. Cover with more siltwater and bring to a boil, then remove from heat and strain.

It may sound nasty because that's kind of how I felt about it—until I tasted it, that is. That roadside cow parsnip turned out to be quite the delicacy. After straining it, I removed the soggy goodness with tongs on account of its extreme tenderness. Then I sprinkled a generous portion of chopped Vidalia onions and smaller amounts of soy sauce and butter (Smart Balance imitation butter, actually) on top and worked the ingredients gently into the mushy mass.

Ah. I very much echo the Marchs' sentiment about the wonderful, wild, and woolly flavor of new cow parsnip leaves. It was absolutely amazing and I savored every minute of it.

The Marchs' book is now out of print and expensive despite the fact that it is but a humble two-color piece with so delicate a binding that the pages fall out all the time. Still, I think those two were onto something. The cow parsnip is delicious, enhanced all the more by their flavorful, exotic descriptions.



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## Yucca in My Pantry Again

**M**y pantry is stocked with yucca flowers again, thanks to one intrepid boyfriend who took it upon himself to harvest it on his way back to the mountains from Denver. We often try to pick yucca up on our way back from parts lower, seeing as it doesn't grow up here near the house above 11,000 feet. But usually the yucca-gathering is not a solo mission—so Gregg deserves much thanks for coming home with some more of the sweet, fleshy flowers that I like to serve with eggs, in stir fries and soups, or fresh on salads.

### Know the Regs

One of the difficulties we've encountered in foraging for wild food is what can seem like a lack of available grounds on which to do so. Signs announcing hefty fines for the removal of flora and fauna are common at the entrances to many public parks and land. (It is important, therefore, to keep an eye out for posted regulations and make sure to only forage where it is permitted).

Depending on where you live, you might be fortunate enough to have access to a national or state park that allows you to forage freely for personal use or to buy a foraging permit. Some parks permit the removal of invasive or unwanted weeds, for example, but definitely no endangered



*Blooming yucca flowers, ripe for harvest.*



species. It's worth looking into rules and regulations if you plan to forage for wild plants in your area, since they vary even among different jurisdictions of the U.S. Forest Service. The local ranger station is a good place to start; you can find out any regulations on protected plants and harvesting methods (no root vegetables, for example) while you're at it.

For the recreational forager to whom access to public land is limited, however, the only other option is privately-owned land. But who has that much private land? Certainly not I. The right thing to do in this case is to find a friend or two with land (that has not been chemically treated) who will let you forage on his or her property. This is the ideal scenario.



*A field of yucca in the Denver suburbs, suburban landscape in the distance.*

## Guerrilla Foraging

Now, as for me, I would be lying if I said that I never took advantage of an opportunity to forage discreetly on land I did not own. I have, in fact, devised a technique for it.

First, I scope out the wild edibles in a given landscape from the passenger seat of a car. You'd be surprised how much you can identify at 35 to 60 mph once you've a trained eye for it—tall spires of bulbous white yucca flowers, big pale green rosettes of furry mullein leaves next to the tall, dried stalks of last year's plants, and so forth. Then I consider factors such as who owns the land and whether or not I feel it is necessary to ask his or her permission to sustainably harvest, say, a handful of dandelion greens or a few mullein leaves here and there.

On a recent trip to the Denver suburbs, then, after staring hungrily out the passenger window at field after field of juicy yucca flowers ripe for the picking, I found what I was looking for—a large, open field, uncrossed by pollution-generating roads, and literally covered with yucca. Upon closer

inspection, Gregg and I observed that not only was the field surrounded by cookie-cutter housing developments, but that former cattle-grazing grounds in question were slated for similar construction in the not-so-distant future.

Is it fair to justify trespassing based on one's own abhorrence of the urban sprawl that gated communities constitute? Perhaps not. But one thing I know for certain is this: It is common practice for builders to completely

raze any and all vegetation on a development site prior to constructing said housing, and to later re-plant the land with lush, chemically-treated dandelion-free lawns and picture-perfect landscaping.

So that was my justification. We drove around until we found an obscure place to park and then disappeared up over the hill with our scissors and bags.

## Yucca Bugs, Yucka!

The yucca was plentiful, although the bugs had gotten to some of it already. In the *Lone Pine Field Guide to Plants of the Rocky Mountains*, Kershaw et. al. (1998) talk about a yucca moth that lives symbiotically with yucca, pollinating the flowers as she flies from plant to plant, boring into the ovaries to lay her eggs. "Ripe yucca pods almost always have a tiny hole, where the grub ate its way out," the guide states. That's great for the yucca and all—but yucka!

So we steered clear of any bug-infested yuccas and were fortunate to find a number of seemingly bug-free plants. We harvested only a few flowers from each one, despite their impending doom, in the hopes that the next time we visit there will still be yuccas, perhaps by then sporting the green fruits with which I experimented initially last year.



*The bugs like yucca too, so watch out for creepy crawlies when you're foraging for yucca flowers.*

On such occasions I always have a hard time keeping myself from looking over my shoulder repeatedly, worried that I'm doing something wrong. I found a similar sentiment, although in a very different context, in a recap of a study of Hmong people foraging on public and private lands near St. Paul, Minnesota. As *Simple Good and Tasty* blog writer Rhena Tantisunthorn explains, "the Hmong face intimidation by land owners who will use tactics such as sending out their dogs to scare the foragers away." According to David Bengston of the USDA Forest Service, a Hmong person is quoted as saying, "Gathering was a way of life back home. But here it's like stealing," (qtd. in Tantisunthorn).

As a result, some Hmong now refer to wild edible plants as "timid" or "embarrassed" vegetables.

"No one is coming," Gregg asserts to me repeatedly upon witnessing my paranoid foraging, "and it isn't even trespassing." Personally, I don't see how he can reach that conclusion after we pass a "No Trespassing" sign in front of a different entrance to the same field. Timid vegetables, indeed.



*A pretty yucca flower fried in butter.*

## Sweet Yucca Flower Petals

When you fry or boil yucca flower petals, they turn light green, causing me to sometimes refer to them as "leaves" by accident, to which Gregg always replies, "I don't want to eat yucca leaves; they're sharp and pointy." Which brings up an important point of caution when it comes to harvesting yucca: In addition to the bug thing and the possible consequences of trespassing, watch out not to get poked by the leaves—as they will most certainly draw blood. The

flower petals are yummy, sweetish and succulent. They make a good addition to stir fries and soups, not to mention an attractive garnish. I also like to fry them up in olive oil, with wild greens or alone, salt lightly, and serve as a side dish.

In *Edible Flowers*:

*From Garden*

*to Palate*, Cathy

Wilkinson Barash

says that when eating

flowers, one should remove the pistils and stamens and only eat the flower petals, although I have yet to discover exactly why. I tend to eat the yucca petals separately from the thick pistils myself, but I do eat the pistils and stamens, usually boiled in soups or cut up and fried sufficiently. (Readers should keep in mind that there may be some variation in the edibility of different species of yucca in different areas of the country, so it is always good to cross reference with multiple guides and to test a small amount first before eating an entire plant by oneself. )



*Tantalizing ingredients of spring.*

## Wildlife in My Yucca Flowers

We finished our ill-gotten Denver yucca pretty quickly, which is why Gregg underwent a subsequent mission near Bailey, Colorado, for this latest batch. It was getting late when he got there, however, and because of the fading light he was unable to distinguish the bugginess of the flowers he snipped. As a result, I found myself washing a few tiny egg nests and little aphid looking babies (I presume) along with their mothers out of some of the flowers, where they were hunkered down near the base of the pistils. (Animal rights people, please don't hate me.) And may this be a lesson to all of you as to why you just don't harvest yucca at night.

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