Wild

Edible NoteBook

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Hi and thanks so much for checking out the *Wild Edible Notebook*, a monthly collection of stories about foraging and using edible wild foods, now available year-round for the first time despite the snow under our feet here in the Colorado high country.

For the next few months, I plan to only write about foraging wild edible snow. Just kidding. Photo by Gregg Davis.

This issue starts with a look at two edible parts of *Opuntia* prickly pear cactus—the flat paddles or pads, and the prickly fruits that adorn them in fall—along with how to defuse the spines, both obvious and innocuous, before you put that cactus in your mouth. After that we peer into my dark pantry to see what wild alcohol infusions are a'brewing, followed by a virtual journey to the warmth and diversity of central Florida's foraging scene at the Florida Herbal Conference. There is also an interview with Florida forager Green Deane. As always, recipes conclude the month's edition.

2021 Update:

Begun as a free publication in 2011, the *Wild Edible Notebook* was available by subscription from 2014-2015. It went on hiatus after that so I could undertake other pursuits, chief among them a book I am writing.

This year, I decided to start reissuing the *Notebooks*, a process that involves reading through and correcting any glaring errors. I will admit that my thinking has evolved on some topics since then, but for the most part I have not rewritten any stories.

For current writing, please visit my blog at wildfoodgirl.com, or social media at Facebook (wildfoodgirl) and Instagram (wild.food.girl), where I post regularly.

Sincerely,
—WFG

Contents:

Jiminy Cricket! There's a grasshopper on that prickly pear. Small mammals and birds also eat the fruit.

REVISED 12.14.21

While the author has prepared this Notebook to the best of her ability, users should take necessary precautions including referencing multiple guide books prior to consuming wild plants. The stories in this Notebook may not be applicable to your locale. Consult with a professional when appropriate. The author shall not be held accountable for what you choose to consume.

Please email corrections to erica@wildfoodgirl.com.

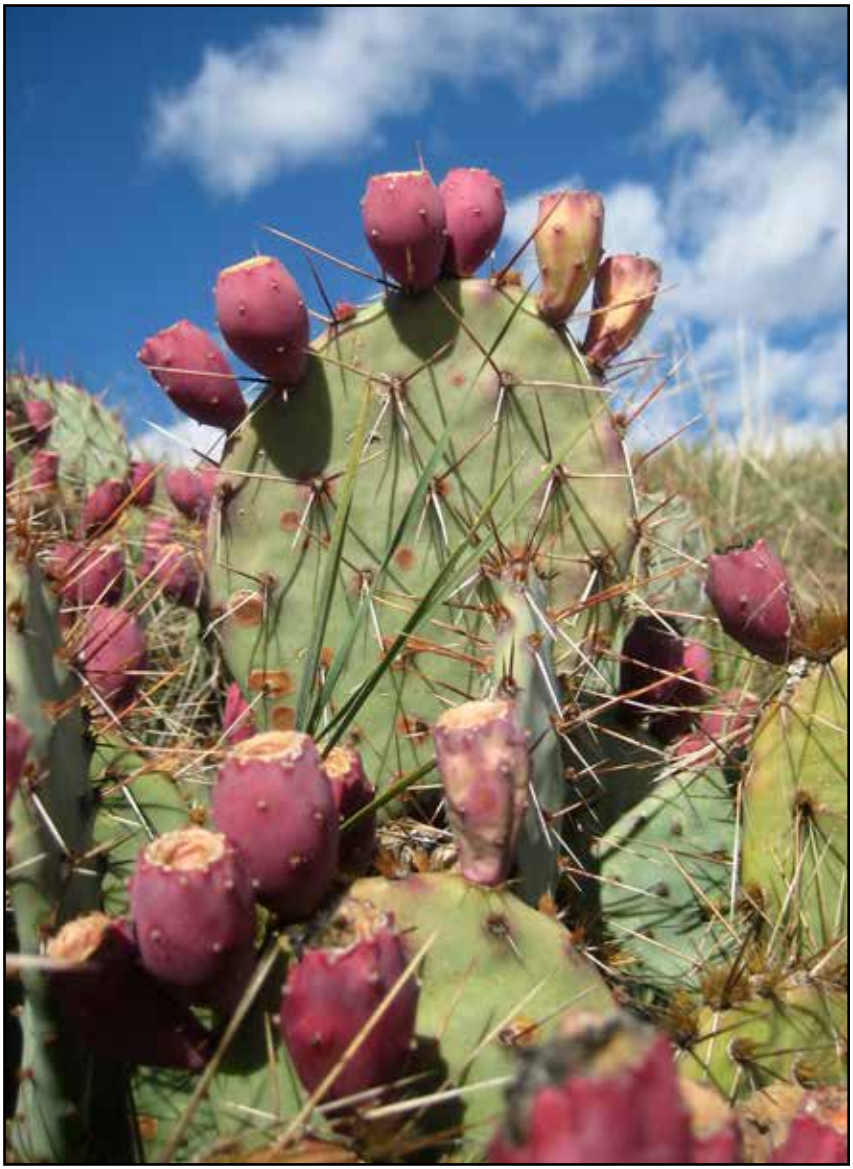
For more information, please visit:

Prickly Pears Everywhere *By WFG*

"Ay, Erica, debes tener cuidado," my friend Rosa lectured me this past summer, in a mothering tone I know from long ago, after I told her about my interest in edible wild plants. "You have to be careful!"

It had been five years since I last saw her, though we used to live close to one another in Los Angeles, where I spent many years in her kitchen learning how to make Mexican food from salsa to horchata.

Rosa lives in Michigan now, so this year Gregg and I passed through on our way back to Colorado from the East Coast. We got there just in time to help her get ready for her youngest daughter's high school graduation party, which in addition to shopping and making more than100 tamales also included preparing a batch of nopalitos, or



Plentiful prickly pears fruiting on a hillside in Boulder, Colorado

cactus pads, to serve in the buffet.

"You're feeding me wild food," I should have said, since the green cactus pads she buys fresh and de-spined from "the Mexican store" in Grand Haven, or pickled (en escabeche) can be found growing wild and free—not only in Mexico or the American Southwest, but also throughout the U.S. and into Canada.

Granted, some species are better than others for the purpose, with the tall, jointed cacti in the Southwest and Mexico producing much larger green paddles, not to mention fleshier fruits, than those found here in Colorado. But all flat-paddled cacti of the genus *Opuntia* are edible, whether they tower over one's head or cower prostrate under one's feet like they do in the foothills of the Continental Divide.

Top & Bottom: *I found these low, fleshy prickly pear cacti in dry, sandy Buena Vista, Colorado this summer with my mom.*

Cactus Pads

I harvested eight small, flat paddles, called cladodes, of a low-lying Colorado *Opuntia* near Buena Vista in late August. I had not thought to bring gloves or tongs that day, as my mom and I were scouting for pinyon pines, not cacti, on that particular mission. But then Mom, bless her heart, found a glove left behind by some OHV drivers, so I put it on and used

a knife to slice the top-most, healthiest-looking paddles from a few carefully chosen cacti, depositing them into a plastic container for safe portage.

My parents' visit proved fruitful not only on the cactus front but also for mushrooms and berries, so I'll admit I forgot about the cactus pads for a while due to all the other wild food processing. They lay neglected in the fridge for more than a month before I pulled some out to prep and eat.

Having learned the hard way more than once that prickly pear cacti parts bear not only long, visible, spines but also small, plentiful, near-invisible spines called glochids that will release into fingers, lips, and tongues, I used tongs to lay the pads on a cutting board and hold each one as I cautiously cut away the outer rim, where the spines were concentrated, and fileted off the skin and attached glochids as if removing skin from a fish.

The pads seemed mature and the skin tough, so I peeled it off entirely using tongs and a knife. That was before I bought myself a tough pair of gloves.

Cactus pads are said to be best in spring when new paddles form, and there are small, greenish, fleshy leaves at the base of each areole or depression on the pad, Samuel Thayer writes in *Nature's Garden* (2010). However, he explains that older, terminal pads can still be used. To prepare the paddles, he slices off the outer rim, cuts out the remaining spines, and then scrubs the surfaces with a copper scouring pad against the direction of the glochids to remove them before rinsing the pads thoroughly.

While some writers recommend burning the glochids off, Connie Green, author of *The Wild Table: Seasonal Foraged Food and Recipes* (2010), says to ignore that advice. "Very young nopales can be easily cleaned of thorns by wiping a dish scrub sponge sideways across the

pads under running water," she writes.

How they are processed depends in part on the age and condition of the pads. "The skins of the new pads may be tender, but those of older pads should be peeled off before consumption," Thayer writes.

Older pads may also contain tough fibers that young pads lack. "I first learned that prickly pear cactus paddles were edible about a year ago," wrote Penny of www.pennilessparenting.com in 2009. "I tried picking a few and, though they tasted ok, they were filled with really fibrous, stringy parts, even after peeling them so much that there was barely anything left." Later, she tried some young pads and found them much better.

Desert Harvesters, a non-profit group based

Top & Bottom: *This "cactus-sicle" was my first go at wild nopales a couple years ago. I harvested the cactus pads on a dry hillside above the desert town of Mesa, Colorado. The pads were tiny but tasty.*

I pan-fried my first tiny nopales and served them with eggs and a dollop of Cholula hot sauce.

in Tucson, Arizona that educates about native foods of the Sonoran Desert, advises looking for fresh, new pads in early spring or after a rainfall, and holding them with kitchen tongs while cutting them from the cactus. Tough gloves are advisable for extra protection.

Carolyn Niethammer (2004) recommends cutting cactus pads an inch above the base to allow the stump to regrow (qtd. in Thayer, 2010).

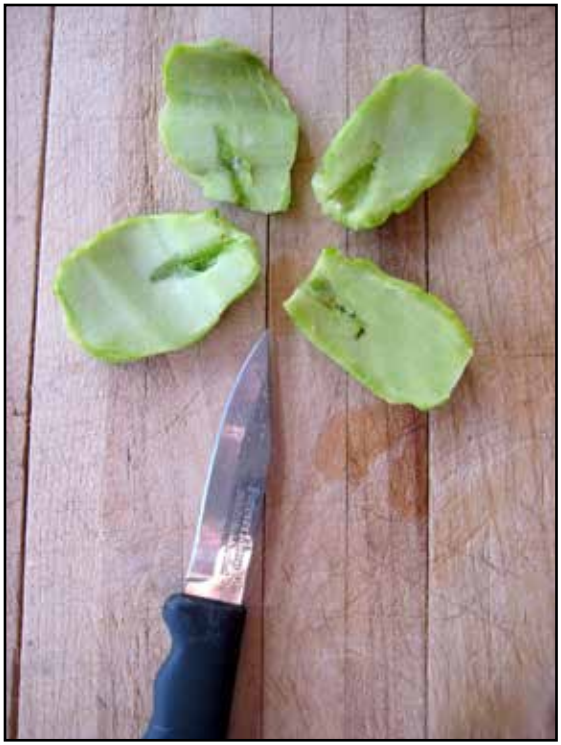
The pads I harvested with my mom had tough skin, so I filleted off not only the areoles but an entire thin layer of skin. It was work, to be sure, but I find myself getting better at it the more I practice.

I made the first batch of thin, green, gooey pads using preparations I knew from Mexican cookery—first cut into strips, sautéed, dried with a paper towel, and served with eggs; and then the next morning fried with crumbled tortilla chips, eggs, and salsa to make chilaquiles. They had a pleasing crunch and hint of citrus despite the gooey texture.

Green describes cactus pads as "baboso," translating the Spanish word to "slobbery." It's an odd texture, one that might be off-putting without the right preparations or expectations.

"Cooking the pads will help reduce this mucilaginous quality," write Desert Harvesters. "Be careful not to overcook them, as that can increase the gumminess." (Visit www.desertharvesters.org for a free, downloadable PDF about harvesting, preparing, and eating prickly pear cactus pads and fruits.)

"Nopales always seem to be described



Cactus flower. Well, not exactly.

as tasting like green beans, bell peppers, or asparagus," Green writes, noting their "citrusy tartness" and texture that has the "slipperiness of okra." However, she points out that some plants are less baboso than others, and that in Mexico, certain varieties are better known for their nopales, while others are known for their fruits.

"I have been eating nopalitos all my life for the past 55 years," an anonymous commenter wrote at Penniless Parenting. "The variety that I eat are the caseros, because we grow them in the back yard and [they] do not have many spines."

Colorado Prickly Pear Cacti

Prickly pears are evergreen cacti with flat, ovate pads with spines that look like a beaver tail, Cattail Bob Seebeck explains in his textbook, *Survival Plants* (2012). In winter, the pads may be pink or purple. He gives an elevation range of 3,500-8,000 feet for Colorado's prickly pears, adding that "the really succulent fruited species are more commonly found in southern and eastern Colorado."

I used at least two different species of Colorado cacti to prepare the dishes in this piece. First was a low-lying, fleshy-paddled *Opuntia* with small spines all over the pads. These I found in dry, sandy, Buena Vista in the pinyon-juniper zone with my mom.

Then there were the cacti in Boulder County from which my friend Butter and I harvested a half bucket each of prickly pear fruits in October. We believe that might be *O. phaeacantha*, the New Mexican prickly pear. This species has larger pads and more widely-spaced areoles than some of our low-lying species, and brown or brown-tipped spines. It is found in rocky gulches but is uncommon on the plains, per Weber and Wittmann (2012). *O. phaeacantha* can stand upright but is smaller than its tall, southwestern counterparts. According to *Great Plains Flora* (1986), it can have spines protruding from areoles on the entire pad, as ours did, unlike *O. macrorhiza*, which has spines mostly on the uppermost areoles and often only on the marginal areoles. Confounding matters, these two species are known to hybridize where ranges overlap.

For the eastern slope of the Colorado Rockies, Weber and Wittmann also list the prostrate *O. macrorhiza*; *O. trichophora* with close areoles and flexuous, closely invested white spines; *O. fragilis*, a cold-loving, brittle cactus whose pads break off easily; and *O. polyacantha*, with

sometimes pink or copper-colored flowers, very spiny joints, and dry fruits.

Note that *O. phaeacantha* is listed as "protected as a cactus, yucca, or Christmas tree" in Nevada, and *O. macrorhiza* is listed as endangered in Iowa, which also has *O. fragilis* listed as a threatened species (USDA). For more regional information on endangered or threatened species not to pick in the U.S., see https://plants.usda.gov/home/raritySearch.

A Wide-ranging Genus

"Prickly pears are a variable group of cacti," Thayer writes. Heights can vary from a few inches to more than 8 feet tall. They are not just desert-dwellers, either. Among the species treated in *Nature's Garden*, he discusses Engelmann prickly pear—the purple-fruiting *O. engelmannii* common to the U.S. Southwest that can reach heights of 10 feet—and small East Coast prickly pears like *O. humifusa*, found on rocky outcroppings, beaches, barrens, sand dunes, and steep, south-facing slopes.

Many cultures eat the fruits, which come in a range of colors. In Mexico they are called "tunas." In Eritrea and Ethiopia they are

Brown-splotched spines on a Colorado Opuntia, found on a flat plateau around 6,000 feet.

"beles," and in Israel they are known as "sabras." Another moniker is "Indian figs," or "fichi d'India" in Italian.

Green (2010) describes prickly pear cacti as "one of the New World's greatest contributions to hungry humankind," noting that *Opuntias* hitched a ride to the Old World because the fruit protected seamen from scurvy. In Australia, however, prickly pear cacti are considered noxious weeds, with a history of taking over farmland since their introduction to the continent.

In subtropical/ semi-arid southern Australia, the green pads are emerging right about now, my friend Aaron Tolley reports. "But sometimes trees in gullies get new growth and a few fruits nearly all year," he said. In Colorado, Seebeck (2012) indicates the fleshy stems are available for consumption in winter too.

Many years ago, on a random adventure through a southern California nudist colony, I found these prickly pears too tantalizing not to pick. I ended up with a ridiculous number of tiny glochids in my fingers, and then my lips when I tried to pull them out with my teeth.

Nopales Grilled Cheese

I used the second batch of cactus pads wildcrafted with my mom to make my own version of Nopales "Grilled Cheese" Paddles with Salsa Fresca from *The Wild Table* (2010). "This may appear to be a grilled cheese sandwich from outer space, but it's actually a tradition on my pal Steve Sando's (Rancho Gordo) backyard grill and on patios all over Mexico," Green writes. The recipe calls for making special cuts in the pads so they don't curl, grilling them with Oaxacan string cheese (quesillo) in the middle, and serving them with salsa fresca overtop.

My friend Rosa's version uses either quesillo or queso fresco, and sometimes includes a slice of ham. You fry the sandwich lightly in a pan with foil overtop for 10-15 minutes on each side, and serve with red or green salsa. "Es muy saludable," she says. "It's very healthy."

My rendition involved broiling the pads in the toaster oven, then melting queso fresco overtop for a pair of open-faced nopales sandwiches, served alongside butternut squash and porcini soup. I did get a couple of sinewy white bits in my mouth, but nothing major.

Nopales can also be store-bought (in the States, try a Mexican market for fresh, whole or jarred, sliced nopales) so you can practice cooking them before harvesting wild ones.

Prickly Pear Fruit

Besides the edible, green cactus paddles, prickly pears bear a prickly, edible fruit that comes in many colors—yellow, red, purple, green, and white—though the plump, purple "tunas" as they are called in Spanish are perhaps best well-known.

Years ago, I enjoyed purchasing them at the farmers market in Los Angeles. They came prepped with the spines removed and skin sliced off, and I'd savor the wild purple flavor

Don't laugh. These are my open-faced wild nopal "grilled cheese" sandwiches.

and gnaw my way through the very hard seeds or swallow them whole—because though very hard and frustrating, the seeds are edible too.

These tunas were quite big in comparison to those I collect in the wild here locally, which are also hot red-pink, but with a whitish bloom on the exterior and maybe 1/3 or 1/4 the size of the store-bought ones.

The prickly pears my friend Butter and I harvested from Boulder County were growing in such a lush stand that we barely made a dent to fill a 5-gallon bucket with the diminutive pears, many of which we plucked directly from the ground where they'd recently fallen. They were growing on the bank of a dry wash in such abundance that, as her friend who invited us to forage there put it (I paraphrase): "You go up the hill and see pink."

We picked the pears with pairs of tongs and dropped the sweet-smelling, glochid-bearing fruits into our buckets as we meandered across the dry hillside, the sun intense but with occasional gusts of luscious autumn wind washing over us as we picked and chatted, the sun blue and bold against the grassy prairie and hills. We couldn't have asked for a prettier day.

Later, those prickly pears filled my car with such an unreal, ambrosial aroma that I was startled every time I returned to it.

"Man, you lucked out! I love buying those in the Mexican markets," a new friend, Greg Guzman, commented on Facebook. "¡Como Mexicano te envidio mucho, delicioso!"

"You would laugh if you saw how small these are," I replied. "The ones that grow near me are the size of my thumb. En serio."

Though the size of our local prickly pears might make peeling and eating tunas less practical than commercial varieties, they make a fabulous hot-pink prickly pear juice when

Wild pink milk, anyone? This glass holds my twist on an Italian cream soda with prickly pear juice, cream, seltzer, and a touch of sugar.

pressed and strained to remove the seeds, skins, and prickly glochids. I've been experimenting with different ways to squeeze out prickly pear juice and use it in the kitchen for the past month.

To date, my favorite use is pink milk—an obsession that harkens back to my mid-20's when I worked as an elementary school teacher in Inglewood, California. Back then, not knowing what to do with myself at lunch break, I'd go to 7-11 for a pink Strawberry Quik milk and sit on the curb drinking it. Now, nearly 15 years and many pink-purple wild edible milk creations later, it looks as if my search for a wild pink milk is finally over.

How pink can a pink soda be? Impossibly, nay embarrassingly so.

My wild twist on pink milk is an Italian cream soda made with sweetened or unsweetened prickly pear juice or syrup, seltzer, and milk or cream. The color matches the boxed milk, but the drink is much more complex, and probably a teensy bit healthier too. It is my number one favorite thing to do with prickly pear juice to date. I cannot get enough.

Impossibly Pink

The first thing I made when I got home with those prickly pears, however, was a pair of margaritas, after Butter got the idea into my head. I squeezed an entire lime's worth of fresh juice into them, along with the juice of four or five prickly pears, a shot of special tequila Gregg's friend gifted him years ago, and a pinch of sugar.

"This margarita is divine," Gregg said. "It's impossibly pink." He liked it so much we went out and got more limes and tequila the next day. "You can really taste the prickly pear," he said.

Prickly pear flavor seems difficult to define. I find our local tunas sweet but not too sweet, sometimes perhaps even a bit like cucumbers, but somehow tropical at the same time, though they are desert and dry-slope dwellers.

Shaw describes prickly pears' flavor as tasting "like a combination of bubble gum, watermelon, and strawberries." Green likens the flavor to "watermelon and raspberries," and Thayer says they are "surprisingly melon-like, but often with a tang and intensity that melons lack." Tilford (1997) writes that "the flavor ranges from bland to sour or sweet," and that

"at best, they taste like sweet pomegranates." There's an article at www.thekitchn.com that says they taste a lot like kiwifruit, and Gregg agrees with the watermelon sentiment. (Mind you we are likely describing a range of different species here.)

Personally, I'm having trouble divorcing the flavor from the wild hot-red-pink color, which becomes especially evident after you process them into juice. I made a prickly pear soda with seltzer, lime, and simple syrup. It came out a hot, deep pink, perhaps better described as "blushing pink."

Neutralizing Glochids

As with the cactus pads, prickly pear fruits have tiny, inconspicuous spines called glochids. These are not only difficult to see, but also detachable and barbed—the source of much pain and suffering to the unwitting cactus handler who makes the mistake of perceiving only the longer spines as a danger.

"Anyone who has viewed these sharp-pointed little needles under a strong lens, with their lateral rows of barbs standing out like the ones on a fishhook, will surely use extreme caution

We used tongs to harvest these plump, Boulder, Colorado-area prickly pears.

We each got half a bucket's worth of prickly pears—and barely made a dent in the hillside full of them.

in handling any part of the plant afterwards," H.D. Harrington wrote in his 1967 book, *Edible Native Plants of the Rocky Mountains*.

And yet, both Harrington and Gibbons (1973) cite an unpublished study by Colyer (1962, 1963) that found glochids in 90% of the feces excavated from an archeological site at Mesa Verde. "She then courageously tried eating some of the fresh fruits with the bristles intact, and strangely enough, beyond a pricking of the tongue, the bristles produced no special ill effect," Harrington wrote of the author's trial.

"I do not ever want to eat a glochid," Gregg replied when I regaled him with the 90% figure. "I don't want them near my face or mouth."

Commenter Alexander Quel countered on my Facebook page: "The glochids are so fine that boiling should take care of them," so I tasted a spoonful of prickly pear mash, blended with the glochids intact. When I sensed a glochid on my tongue, however, I freaked out and spit it out. Perhaps I'd best give this more thought, I thought.

Removing glochids is perhaps most important if you are planning to eat or use the

cactus fruit whole, and there seem to be as many techniques for doing so as there are glochids. These range from "rolling the fruit vigorously in sand with a broom to washing them vigorously with gloved hands and a brush to peeling them," Green writes. Shaw (2011) belongs to the torch-'em-off camp, recommending readers use a grill or burner to torch them briefly before using a knife to slice off the skins.

My buddy Aaron Tolley from Australia uses a small gas camping stove and a flameproof tray to singe the glochids. "With the barbed tips damaged they won't stick to anyone or anything," he wrote to me. "I suggest misting the plant before picking, as glochids in some varieties easily go airborne and getting an eyeball full of 'em is really bad news. You can use a torch made of a bunch of dry grass to singe off the majority of 'em before picking if you like, too."

Top: *More Boulder-area prickly pears. Note the tufts of nasty, inconspicuous, rust-colored glochids on the pads.* ***Right****: I messaged my friend right away when I saw this photo. "Oh no! Did you get a mouthful of glochids?" I asked. "I got 'em in my lips, then they were in my tongue, then they were in my fingers, where they might still be," he replied. I've read white glue or warm wax, allowed to dry before being pulled off, can help get them out. That or butter or oil supposedly helps. Photo by Elin Van Atta.*

I've been swishing my prickly pears around in a tub of water before scrubbing them clean. Look at the stuff that floats to the surface.

Blow torches were reportedly used by cattle ranchers to burn off the spines, in situ, in times of food shortage so the cattle could eat the cacti (Krockmal and Krockmal, 1974; Harrington, 1967). In today's fire-prone climate, however, it makes sense to carefully consider whether that method is worth it.

After rinsing the prickly pears in a tub, I used Thayer's copper-pad scouring method to remove glochids from fruits I wanted to skin and eat, spitting out the extremely hard seeds. I also halved a scrubbed batch, spooned out the seeds, and dried the skins with their thin layer of fruit—a method Thayer describes and my friend Butter raves about. They are indeed delicious—such that I cannot hold myself back from eating them. But for me, to date, this has also proven quite time consuming.

Juice Extraction

Extracting the juice is another story, however. To do so, Desert Harvesters say to "first wash the fruit by placing it in a sink full of cool water and swishing it around with a large spoon. Then place whole fruits, glochids and all, into a blender or food processor. Blend to make a slurry. Strain the slurry though a pillow case, fine mesh strainer or a colander lined with cloth," and "use a spoon to press the juice from the seeds and skins." The juice will stain, they caution, so they recommend wiping down counters and wooden surfaces immediately after use and wearing an apron or old clothes.

I tried a couple methods, always rinsing the

prickly pears first after hearing an "itchy bum" horror story from a friend of mine who believes the horrific, after-consumption itching had to do with an irritant on unwashed prickly pears, though neither of us has replicated the experiment.

Clad in tough gloves, I then mashed a couple of batches with a meat tenderizer, and a few more with the blender, afterwards straining and squeezing the pulp through old pieces of shirt I could later discard. After that, because I am crazy for this wild edible sport, I threw the cloth, pulp, glochids, seeds, and all into a cooking pot in a generous bath of water and brought the mixture to a bare simmer, then strained again and cooled for a less concentrated batch of juice—basically like an "agua fresca" or "fruit water" in Mexican cuisine.

Last, I laid the simmered seeds and pulp on oven paper on a cookie sheet to air-dry, because if I can figure out a way to neutralize the glochids, I'd like to try grinding them into flour. In her *1986 Cookbook*, Regina H. Lynch notes that dried seeds of twistspine prickly pear (*O. phaeacantha*) have been ground into flour by Navajo people and used to thicken soups, puddings, or fruit dishes (http://herb.umd.umich.edu), and other authors write of *Opuntia* seed use by native groups for flour too.

I tried mashing the pears with a meat tenderizer. Later I tried blending them, glochids and all, before straining through a shirt. Both worked. Photo by Gregg Davis.

Prickly Essence

In the meantime, however, I am blessed with copious amounts of prickly pear juice—now that Gregg finally convinced me to process the big tub of them that has been sitting in the fridge, occupying the spot where the milk is supposed to go.

Prickly pear juice can be consumed as juice—though Desert Harvesters warn of a cooling effect "known occasionally to cause chills and body aches," citing a bad reaction from some people who'd consumed approximately a half cup of prickly pear juice diluted in water. "Prickly pear juice is very cooling," their pamphlet explains. "Do not consume high quantities of non-diluted raw juice." On the other hand, a few glasses of lemonade with a splash of prickly pear juice can produce a desirable cooling effect "in the dog days of August and the still-here September summer," the Arizona-based group writes. "Just

start with small quantities and increase in small increments to find the amount that is right for you!"

I really enjoy gulping down my prickly pear agua fresca straight from the bottle (like I do with the milk, much to Gregg's chagrin). Despite the cold climate here at 10,000 feet in the Colorado Rockies, I have no ill effects to report as of yet from this wanton practice. We have also been cutting the prickly pear juice into our kombucha, as Gregg made an insanely strong batch recently. He liked the combo enough to serve himself some in my absence.

For the more concentrated prickly pear juice, extracted using the squeeze method, syrup can be made by dissolving sugar into it. This can be used in cocktails or

Scene of the crime: I'm getting better, but no less messy, at squeezing fruit juice through a T-shirt. This time, I sprayed the dry, white part of the cloth with water before donning tough gloves to squeeze the juice from the prickly fruit mash.

***2021 update:** I have since abandoned T-shirts and now use food-safe bags or cheesecloth for straining.*

virgin sodas, glazes, jellies, and vinaigrettes, to name a few.

Shaw's instructions for making prickly pear syrup (2011) use citric acid to provide what he deems a necessary tartness to complement the prickly pears' flavor. He avoids excess heating so as not to destroy the fruits' vitamin C. "A natural way to use this syrup is to mix it with tequila in a cocktail—it's cactus and cactus!" he writes.

I also made a kind of jalapeño prickly pear salsa, served on Panko-breaded chicken, that contained bright pink prickly pear juice, a splash of golden currant juice (*Ribes aureum*), one finely chopped jalapeño, the leftover pulp from a squeezed lime, a pinch of sugar, and

Above: *The ice cream looks like bubblegum, but it's prickly pear, made with cream plus juice plus sugar, then hand-cranked in a small ice cream maker. Yum. Photo by Gregg Davis.* ***Below:*** *Boulder-area prickly pears decorate an entire hillside.*

a minced garlic clove, cooked together on the stovetop. I think it needs work, but Gregg was quite keen on it with the chicken.

A Season for Contemplation

As of now, prickly pear season has passed in many parts. Thayer writes that where he lives, *O. humifusa* and *O. macrorhiza* ripen in late August and are best picked in mid-September. Likewise, Desert Harvesters indicate that August and September seem to be the best season in Tuscon.

However, because the fruits can stay on the cactus for months at a time in some regions, now might be the perfect time—especially if you're new to the sport—to practice with a couple of prickly pear fruits (or cactus pads), so that when they are abundant you can take full advantage of the pricklies' edible fruits and veggies.

I found plenty of ripe fruits intact on a mid-November trip to Broomfield, Colorado, though the cross-wrinkles on the pads evidenced some stress from freeze-thaws. Gibbons writes of finding ripe fruit in mid-December in Arizona (1973), and my old *Sunset Mexican Cook*

These prickly pears have been hit with a couple of freeze-thaws, but the fruit is still edible.

Book (1974) says to look for fruits in produce markets or Mexican grocery stores until mid-December.

In Southern Australia, too, Aaron Tolley reports that the fruits generally ripen in late summer/early winter. Since our seasons are flip-flopped, those in similar climates can go for nopales now and anticipate the fruits' ripening come autumn.

Cactus Then & Now

To eat cactus fruits and pads, for me, is to be transported back to Mexico, where I spent a formative four months in my early 20's. I lived with Mexican families in Cuernavaca and then the mountains of Guerrero while studying Spanish and traveling around to see the sights and sample the food y practicar mi español.

Then I find myself back in Los Angeles in my mid-20's, at Rosa's kitchen table—where there's queso, salsita, shredded lettuce with lime squeezed on top, milanesa if I'm lucky, and occasionally nopales—trying my best to learn how to cook in Spanish.

My neighborhood in high county Colorado is a different place. There is snow on the ground much of the year, and I don't hear a lot of Spanish, except when I am teaching well-heeled Spanish-speaking travelers to esquiar o surfear en la nieve (ski or snowboard).

But there is comfort in the fact that just a short jaunt down the hill I'll find prickly pear cacti bearing nopales and tunas to nourish the body while helping me connect to that person I was, and the people I know and love, en español.

■

I made 100 tamales with my friend Rosa this summer. Photo by Carlos Ley.

Wild Mixology

By WFG

Every year I flavor a few bottles of vodka with wild ingredients. This year I did chokecherry, pineappleweed, wild mint, black currants, and prickly pear. Last year I did elderflower, angelica, and a gin from juniper, angelica, and coriander. At any given time I guess there are quite a few different wild vodkas in my closet.

Vodka is a popular choice for infusing alcohol because of its mild flavor, though pretty much any spirit can be used as a medium. The alcohol extracts the flavor while favoring if not ensuring a botulism-free environment, and there is a nearly endless spectrum of flavor possibilities—especially in the world of wild plants.

I'll be the first to admit my method of making wild infusions is not very sophisticated. I just stuff the wild edibles—generally berries, fruits, flowers, or herbs—into a jar of vodka, making sure the ingredients are covered, and then cap it and forget about it for a while.

The pineappleweed vodka infusion sat in the closet for a very long time, but I love it just the same.

Sure I'll trim back that mint for you. Here, let me just stuff it into this jar of vodka I brought with me.

Eventually I'll strain out the plant matter and serve the infused booze straight up in shot glasses, sweetened into a syrupy liqueur over crushed ice, or mixed into all manner of random wild cocktails—first having made absolutely certain of my plant ID, of course, and testing them on myself before serving to a friend or family member.

I enjoy taking out a new wild vodka from time to time over the winter months, to sip on cold nights by the fake fireplace as snowflakes fall into a soft blanket on the mountain. It makes for a nice trip back to the last growing season while my mind is on winter things, reminding me of the wild promise in the season to come.

The Spirit

Vodka is the go-to liquor for the infusion-obsessed because it "isn't very bold or complex," explains Marcia Simmons, author of *DIY Cocktails: A Simple Guide to Creating Your Own Signature Drinks*. Therefore, "it can pair well

I made some infusions for later, but I also couldn't resist some mojitos with the fresh-cut mint.

with something lightly flavored like grapes, as well as something strong like a hot pepper."

But with stronger spirits, finding good flavor combos is important. "If you're using a dark rum or whiskey, you want bold, rich [ingredients] to stand up to that," cocktail consultant Ryan Magarian told *Imbibe Magazine*. "Spices are great with dark rums."

In our house, brandy infused with the dark, earthy flavor of trailing black currants (*Ribes laxiflorum*) is a longtime favorite, and I'm very much looking forward to giving some recently foraged fennel seeds a try in rum or whisky.

"If you're infusing anything that's low proof, it needs to be refrigerated after opening to protect the volatile flavor constituents," my science-knowing, food-loving, foraging friend Maria, who blogs at www.greengabbro.net, tells me.

Even very high-proof spirits like Everclear can be used for infusions. Bartenders, like herbalists, refer to these often intense flavor extractions as "tinctures"—best for splashing sparingly into a cocktail.

Several writers recommend using middle-shelf spirits for infusions—not too fancy or expensive, as you are likely to lose the intended flavor, but not too cheap either. Of course, this does not keep me from harvesting my gallons from the bottom shelf each time I visit the liquor store for more vodka.

Wild Drink Station

The other night I brought my wild drink station to my friend's house for his birthday. I took vodkas infused with chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*), mint (*Mentha sp.*) and wild chamomile (*Matricaria discoidea*), along with a jar of simple syrup (made by heating a

Mints have opposite leaves and square stems, though not all plants with those characteristics are mints. Aromatic species with a strong, minty smell are dead giveaways, however.

I painstakingly picked the elderflowers from their cymes and dropped them into the vodka while Gregg piloted us cross-country in the Vanagon.

1:1 sugar to water mix in a saucepan until the sugar melted) and some seltzer.

Nobody wanted any of the mint, although Gregg had originally said to bring it so he could drink it over crushed ice, Rumple Minz style. We harvested the purple-stemmed mint from the side of a pond at a friend's house outside Ithaca, New York, during our road trip this past summer, and later I stuffed it into vodka scrounged from my parents' liquor cabinet.

Afterwards, I searched for mint infusion techniques online, only to find one account that recommended discarding the stems and using only the leaves so as to avoid a "planty" flavor, and another that thought a quick infusion best to avoid chlorophyll decomposition into brown ick. Well, my brown mint booze does taste a tad planty—so I'll probably give it another go next summer, perhaps without the stems, to see how it turns out—just so long as Gregg succeeds in finishing this batch first. It's pretty good with prickly pear syrup over crushed ice, so maybe I can help him with that.

A Method to the Madness?

My method for infusing vodka may be as basic as my cooking, but the fact is that techniques and recipes have proliferated in the last couple of decades since infusing alcohol came into vogue—some calling for heating the ingredients, some for a pinch of sugar, some for

Next page: *I found these ripe chockecherries down Minturn way on the Western Slope of Colorado's Continental Divide this summer.*

Chokecherry vodka, lemon juice, and seltzer with a splash of simple syrup, anyone?

leaving the infusion uncapped for a few days, some for capping it.

Similarly, a 1968 translation of the original 1938 *Larousse Gastronomique* includes many different techniques for infusing different flavors in alcohol—from covering, corking, shaking, and diluting to "very specific time frames," a friend pointed out to me.

I discovered I might be leaving my infusions for too long. "Some items release their flavor very quickly," Simmons writes. "Herbs, hot peppers, and vanilla beans, for instance, can make an intensely flavored infusion in as little as a day. And after three days of steeping, these can taste pretty gross. On the other hand, dried spices can take two weeks or more to give you the amount of flavor you want." Not that this has kept me from drinking every last drop of my favorite wild alcohol infusions—even the ones that sat on the shelf (and not the fridge) for months at a time. But it seems as though methods for infusing alcohol with edible ingredients can vary nearly as widely as the ingredients themselves, producing creative and interesting results no matter which way they're done.

Of course, that does not mean that anything and everything on earth should be infused in alcohol and drunk.

Just Say No to Tobacco

In some cases, people are pushing the boundaries in the name of new concoctions—like by using tobacco, for instance.

Blogger Darcy O'Neil—who infuses chemistry into his writings on "all things drink-related" at www.artofdrink.com—takes on the issue, warning that nicotine is very toxic in and of itself, and that the toxicity is much greater when the nicotine is infused or extracted in alcohol versus smoked in cigarette form. This makes for the potential of "a very unpleasant experience," he writes, if you knock back a couple rounds of tobacco-infused cocktails, especially for nonsmokers.

Maria says she decided tobacco was too dangerous because "even if you get a reasonable safety margin for 1-2 drops of tobacco bitters in a cocktail, it's still potentially dangerous if spilled, since nicotine can also be absorbed through the skin."

And Gregg said, "I've thrown up because of nicotine more than once, each time because of chew," when I regaled him with this information. You'd think Gregg would have learned his lesson the first time around.

O'Neil includes an update: "After posting this article, the 'user experiences' have been rolling in and it seems that a number of people have learned the hard way. If you operate a bar, or work in one, you definitely need to consider liability issues if you are serving tobacco infused cocktails."

Caution with Fruit Stones

Caution also appears to be in order if you are infusing alcohol with the pits of stone fruits like cherries, peaches, apricots, and others that have amygdalin-containing pits. The amygdalin breaks down into hydrogen cyanide (toxic) and almond-flavored benzaldehyde (good) when enzymes in the fruits/pits or the human body act upon it.

Properly processed, the pits of such fruits have been used impart a pleasant, almondy flavor to alcohol—as in amaretto, Creme de Noyau, and Ratafia de Noyau.

Done improperly, however, O'Neil writes that fruit stones can make for a dangerous cocktail. In fact, he penned a two-part series at his site, *Art of Drink*, in response to a reader's inquiry as to whether a recipe that called for 500 grams of cherry kernels in one liter of brandy was safe. After explaining the chemistry of cyanide concentration likely to result from the recipe, he concludes:

I made the smallest batch of country wine ever—with a small bag of golden currants collected in late fall in downtown Breckenridge—on the countertop in a tall jar. Photo by Gregg Davis.

A wild drink station with simple syrup, prickly pear vodka, and wild chamomile vodka. Party time!

"Personally I wouldn't feel comfortable with this liqueur around. If someone unknowingly took a shot of this, they would be in a world of hurt." (He describes how cyanide can be removed so the kernels can be used in liqueurs in Part II of the series).

There are proponents of infusing fruit stones directly into alcohol without additional preparation, though many of the online pieces state something to the effect of: "I looked into it and determined it is safe but you have to make the decision for yourself."

"Incidental consumption of cyanide in the context of a diet with plenty of iodine and B12 is totally fine, and these liqueurs have long traditions to back up their safety (so long as you exercise moderation in your use of pits and consumption of the result)," Maria wrote me.

I'm not going to say I haven't tried soaking a small quantity of peach bits and pits in vodka myself, but I guess what concerns me is how easy it would be to make the mistake of thinking you should just fill a whole bottle with pits for more flavor, and end up with something more than mildly toxic.

Hence I thought it worthy of mention, and yes, you must make the decision for yourself. As for me, I'll probably not do it again without following proven or trusted instructions.

Plants & Parts to Think Twice About

I also find myself becoming more cautious about infusing alcohol with plants or plant parts not commonly considered edible—like the outer bark of pine trees, for instance. Who knows if the terpenes contained therein, once used for making turpentine, would be more likely to do good or harm in concentrated form?

Because alcohol and water can be used to extract medicinal and/or toxic components from a plant, it makes sense to make infusions with commonly accepted edibles and wild edibles, to try plants that others have tested already, and to use known edible parts.

"I don't want those hydrogen cyanides," Gregg murmured, half asleep on the couch, when I told him about the fruit stones.

You also might want to think twice about infusing North American wild gingers—*Asarum canadense* in the East and *A. caudatum* in the West—in alcohol. "Just as with bracken fern, cicerchia beans and, to some extent daylilies, wild ginger is a double-edged sword," forager-blogger Hank Shaw writes (http://honest-food.net/2012/05/22/wild-ginger-edible-toxic), because North American wild gingers and related Chinese medicinal gingers contain aristolochic acid (AA), which can damage the kidneys in quantity. Since AA is very soluble in ethanol and acetic acid, he warns: "Do not steep wild ginger in alcohol or vinegar."

Cokecherry Booze for the Win

But back to the party. Most of my friends went for the chokecherry vodka, which surprised me. Ashley wanted it with seltzer but no sugar syrup and her better half wanted just a little added sweetness to the same combo. And here I'd been thinking of chokecherry booze as the cheapest of all—the malt liquor of wild vodkas, so to speak.

I had been drinking the chokecherry vodka at home in a caffeinated mix of chokecherry, milk, sugar syrup, and coffee and calling it a "cokecherry," a tricky and not altogether fantastic combo that gave me a headache in the morning. But my friends seem to think the chokecherry vodka best, so perhaps I've been sweetening it too much?

Later, I tried a non-alcoholic chokecherry shrub-style drink, made by mixing the concentrated chokecherry juice with vinegar and seltzer but leaving out the sugar entirely. This became my favorite non-alcoholic beverage for a few days. It is reminiscent of chokecherry kombucha, which is also good.

As for the chokecherry vodka, I am curious but hesitant about including the pits in an infusion, so for now I'm sticking with concentrated chokecherry juice until I learn more about safe processing methods.

Subtle, Golden Pineappleweed

The last wild vodka I brought to the party was infused with pineappleweed, also called wild chamomile. I made it by stuffing a bottle full of fruity heads, green stems, and feathery leaves, then pouring enough vodka in to fill the bottle and leaving it for a few months in the pantry.

I first thought to make this after reading about Maria's pineappleweed and chamomile liqueur at www.greengabbro.net. Her instructions use just the flower heads—though I found myself

Better than a Bud Light:
A virgin prickly pear Italian cream soda.

too lazy to separate them when it came time for action. And I'd intended a quick infusion after reading another account that said not to leave the pineappleweed going too long lest the batch become bitter—but in the end, time got the best of me.

Still, I love this vodka. It has a pleasant chamomile-like flavor and a subtle gold-yellow color. With a kiss of simple syrup it makes for a tasty liqueur indeed, especially served over ice. Add a little seltzer and you have yummy chamomile vodka soda, and with a squeeze of lemon, it's a different cocktail altogether.

I'd thought the pineappleweed vodka was going to be the star of the party, but this was not meant to be. Not that it bothers me any, since it just means there is more for me.

Wild Virgin Cocktails

Alcohol is not the only way to go with wild-flavored beverages. Wild syrups are a great addition to a wild drink station, to serve to designated drivers and kids alike.

It's an easy enough practice to get into while processing quantities of wild berries or fruits—infuse a bottle of vodka or two, and at the same time refrigerate or can some wild-flavored sugar syrups—made by dissolving sugar into concentrated wild fruit juice.

After that, the nonalcoholic options are many—wild sodas (mix syrup with seltzer), wild milks (mix with milk) or best yet, wild Italian cream sodas (mix syrup with cream and seltzer).

That way, the kids can have their own wild party alongside the wild grownups.

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Florida in the Spotlight

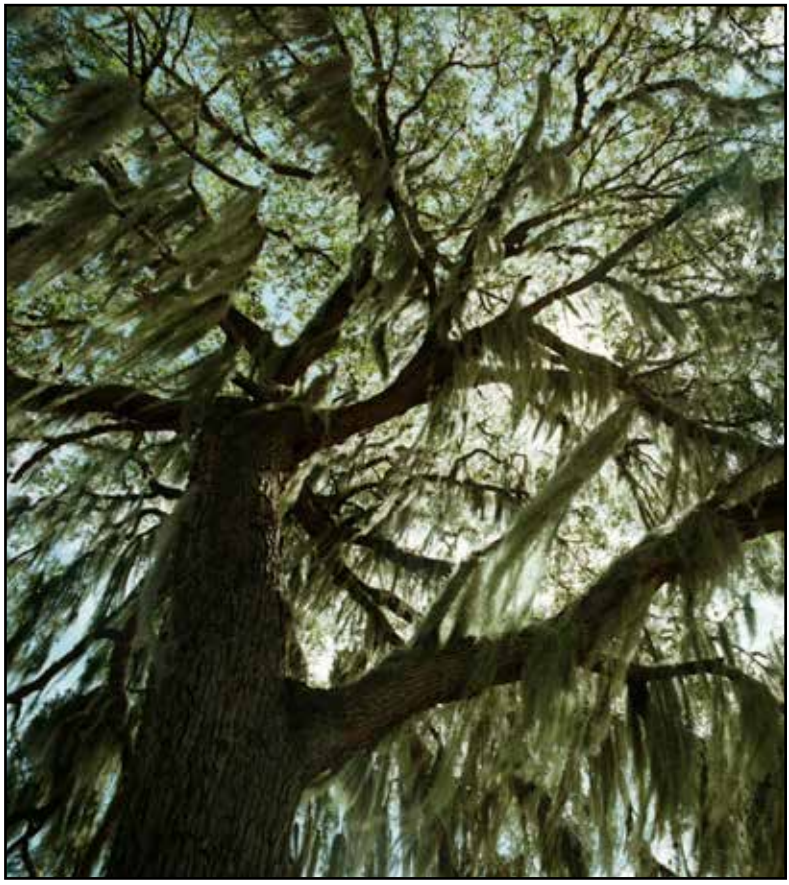
A Sense of Plants & Place

3rd Annual Florida Herbal Conference *By WFG*

Florida herbalist Emily Ruff grew a love for plants at an early age. Her father was a botanist, and her grandfather an urban farmer. At age 18, she traveled to Guatemala to work with medicinal herbs and to learn the traditions of what she describes, broadly speaking, as "our herbal ancestors." Later, she studied under the late George D'Arcy, founder of the Florida School of Holistic Living for which Ruff now serves as director, as well as Rosemary Gladstar at Sage Mountain Herbal Retreat Center in central Vermont.

Although she spent nearly a decade as a practicing herbalist in Orlando, traveling to New England or North Carolina, as she put it, "to get my fix of the brother and sisterhood of the green people," Ruff said she couldn't help but feel isolated. "The Florida herbal community for a long time was largely disconnected," she explained. But then Gladstar encouraged her to seek out other Florida herbalists.

"I started to poke around in the rocks and gardens and realized that in most of the major communities in Florida there was at least one practicing herbalist," Ruff said. This realization became the impetus behind the Florida Herbal Conference.



Workshops at the Florida Herbal Conference take place lakeside in the shade of majestic live oaks draped with Spanish moss. Photo by Ralph Guinta.

Note to readers: *The Florida Herbal Conference celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2021 as a virtual conference. I have been unable to confirm if it is taking place again in 2022.*

Flora & Community

The conference will take place February 28 to March 2, 2014 at Camp Winona in De Leon Springs. It is geared toward all levels of interest and experience, with more than 45 workshops including clinical herbalism, herbal crafts, herbal tradition and history, medicine making, edible plant identification walks, and hands-on demonstrations.

Many of the workshops' 30 teachers are based in Florida or have some connection to the state's plant life, in keeping with the goal of uniting Florida's plant people. At the same time, the gathering has become an opportunity to showcase the state's unique flora.

"We technically have four zones in Florida if you include the Keys," Ruff said. The Florida Keys are in zone 11; southern Florida is zone 10; central Florida is zone 9, and northern Florida is zone 8. The conference takes place in central Florida, which is "tropical in the warm months, and temperate in the cool months—a different cycle from that of the north," Ruff said. This "makes it a delight to share our plant life—it's so vastly different. We have some overlapping plants, and a whole lot of new ones."

Emily Ruff is the director of the Florida School of Holistic Living, which became a nonprofit organization under her leadership, and which organizes the Florida Herbal Conference. Ruff will teach about integrating lunar rhythms into gardening, medicine, and daily ritual. Photo by Caitlin Battersby.

In addition to taking part in workshops, participants canoe on the lake and explore the 100-acre grounds. Photo by Ralph Guinta.

For example, *Stellaria media*, the chickweed common to much of the United States, comes into season in late December in central Florida. It's a short season, ending by Valentine's Day or the Spring Equinox, Ruff said. In spring, however, a chickweed relative sometimes referred to as "tropical chickweed," *Drymaria cordata*, comes into season. "It's used pretty interchangeably in Caribbean traditions the way northern traditions use *Stellaria media*," she said. "There's no time of year we don't have chickweed, it's just a different species than those in the north have."

The region is also home to foraging teacher Green Deane, YouTube's "most watched forager in the world" and author of www.eattheweeds.com. He describes a recent change to the area's zone definition: "I think I am now in 9B, which is on the temperate/subtropical line," he said. "We get occasional light freezes and some frosts in winter. No snow."

At the late February conference, Dean said there should be chickweed (*S. media*), pellitory, stinging nettles, and dollarweed, and likely wild mustards and radishes too due to the proximity to farmland. "These plants are interesting because they can serve two purposes—medicine and food," he said. "Depending upon the weather there might also be some *Smilax* tips, quite tasty."

The Workshops

The conference focuses first on the healing flora of Florida, though approximately 25% of the workshops will center on edible wild foods, Ruff said, pointing out that "the herbal world" is not just about medicine but also balance and how to maintain a relationship with nature—a

big part of that being the food that we eat. "For us, wild nutrition is really one of the best preventative medicines out there," she said.

Dean will lead 1-1.5 hour plant ID walks on the grounds. "It's the luck of the draw [what we'll see], plant-wise," he said. "It's also usually first thing in the morning, first light, 7 a.m. or so, and chilly."

Sometimes, Ruff joins Dean on plant walks. "He has an entertaining presence in addition to being very knowledgeable," she said. Often, he jokes that they have opposite goals—that she, as an herbalist, wants the plants to cause a reaction, but as a forager seeking to eat the plants, he doesn't.

The conference will also include Powerpoint presentations on edible plants by 80-year-old Florida forager and author Peggy Lantz, who has been eating wild plants for more than 50 years and has a new book, *Florida's Edible Wild Plants*, coming out in May of 2014 on Seaside Publishing, a subsidiary of the University Press of Florida. Lantz edited the Florida Native Plant Society's magazine and books for 15 years and co-authored articles with the late Richard Deuerling, compiling them into a 72-page book titled *Florida's Incredible Wild Edibles* (1993). Lantz also authored *The Young Naturalist's Guide to Florida* and *The Florida Water Story*.

Other wild food presenters include Andy Firk from southern Florida, who speaks on medicinals too, and Mycol Stevens (www.floridaearthskills.blogspot.com), who will offer a workshop entitled "Florida Ethnobotany: Botany in the Tradition of Frank Cook."

Ruff herself will present on "Moon Medicine," offering insights gleaned from years of study with numerous teachers and traditions along with personal practice into how integrating lunar rhythms into gardening, medicine, and daily ritual can enhance health and wellbeing while also deepening one's relationship with plants, planet, and spirit.

Keynotes by Weed & Winston

Guest herbalists David Winston and Susun Weed join the conference for the first time this year to give keynote addresses on Friday and Saturday nights, respectively.

Winston will speak on "Herbal Medicine: The Past, Present, and Future," exploring plant healing through time, including taking a look at the United States' emergence from what he calls "the herbal dark ages." He will also discuss the popularity of herbal medicine for allopathic uses (to treat and suppress symptoms), examining the effectiveness of this practice while encouraging participants to take stock of where herbalism is now in order to guide its future development for the benefit of all.

Susun Weed will present "Herbal Medicine Is People's Medicine," a call to action for herbalists to establish themselves as a resource for health, especially now in the context of America's faltering primary healthcare system. "We need to get the word out now that herbal medicine is one of the safest, easiest, and most effective ways to care for common complaints, including colds, flu, fevers, pain, infections, injuries, menstrual problems, fertility, menopause, UTI's, STD's, prostate swelling, high blood pressure, back pain, stress, and headaches (to mention a few)," she writes. The presentation will include discussion of specific herbs and their uses.

Ruff looks forward to bringing the expertise of

Camping out lakeside. Photo by Ralph Guinta.

Winston and Weed, whose "written works have inspired generations of herbalists," to Florida, which she says is remote enough that it doesn't always get the best speakers—or bands, for that matter.

Both speakers will also offer intensive workshops for an add-on fee, Winston presenting on "The Energetics of Herbs," and Weed on "The Great Remedies" available locally in many regions.

The Conference

The Florida Herbal Conference takes place lakeside on 100 acres, where participants can camp, rent a bunk in a cabin, or stay in RV's or trailers. Workshops are spread throughout the long weekend, with five or six taking place at a given time. Recordings will also be available for missed workshops.

The event includes a marketplace of herbal vendors, artisans, and crafters; musical activities each evening; herbal activities during free time;

Kids have always been welcome at the Florida Herbal Conference, but this year for the first time there is a specialized youth program with a full curriculum of educational activities. Photo by Ralph Guinta.

morning yoga and guided movement; drumming; a fire circle; henna; singing; canoeing; and regional mixers. A meal plan ticket is available, along with onsite food vendors.

New this year is a youth program that includes a curriculum of educational activities for kids ages 3-10. Kids' workshops include "Herbs, Ice Cream, and Toothpaste," drumming, "Kitchen Medicine for Home Remedies," "Essential Oils for Children," and more. Parents can sign their children up for the youth program for $125 and then attend their choice of workshops while the kids are engaged. "We're very excited to bring that aspect in this year," Ruff said. "The younger we instill this respect for nature, and pass along these teachings, the more they grasp it."

The conference is hosted by the Florida School of Holistic Living, a nonprofit organization. Approximately 400 people are expected to attend, and the proceeds benefit United Plant Savers. For details, visit www.floridaherbalconference.org.

"February is a beautiful time of year to be in Florida, especially if you are in a location where you feel kind of ready for winter to pass on to spring," Ruff said. "Our winters are comparatively mild to other climates, so it's a great time to come feel some warmth."

■

Foraging Florida with Green Deane

An Interview with the Creator of EatTheWeeds.com *By WFG*

Forager, writer, and teacher Green Deane has hosted plant identification walks at the Florida Herbal Conference. Here, Deane speaks on Florida foraging and the state's growing community of plant enthusiasts.

So you started teaching foraging around 20 years ago?

Yes, but I have been foraging all my life.

How long have you been in Florida?

37 years this coming January

Can you tell me a little about Florida foraging?

Florida foraging is a significant challenge. The species usually vary a lot from foraging books using pictures taken in temperate climates. We have afternoon hurricanes called thunderstorms which can result in temporary environmental changes. You can find a swamp plant in a dry place, or a dry plant in a swampy place. Knowing how the local weather and seasons affect plants is important in Florida.

Florida forager Green Deane takes conference participants on a plant ID walk around the grounds. Photo by Ralph Guinta.

Where were you before Florida?

I grew up in Maine. I love summer in Maine—both days of it.

What are some differences between Maine and Florida foraging?

Florida is a long state. I have to know temperate plants to tropical ones. We also have a huge amount of edible ornamentals imported because of the climate. Plants can also get stressed by the heat and just don't look the same as their northern brethren.

Dandelions are a good example. Here they can be small little red things with tiny blossoms.

And you are YouTube's "most watched forager in the world"?

Had I known the videos would have been watched that much I would have done a better job from the beginning. It was just me and a $149 Flip camera. But after you do something 100 times you get better at it. They are now past two million views and I have more videos to make (and a new camera!).

Can you explain your "itemizing" system for me?

It is a way to organize information that you need to know before you can consider a plant for food. Identification, time of year, environment, method of preparation—you have to fully answer those four requirements. If something is wrong or doesn't fit you either have the wrong plant or there may be a reasonable explanation. Either way the problem has to be resolved. For example, some plants go through their entire two-year cycle in one year because of the warmer climate. If something like the time of year is wrong it could be the wrong plant or a regional difference. Checking those items is like an insurance policy.

Would you like to comment about the community you have been a part of and are helping to grow?

One of the nice things about foraging is there is room for a variety of personalities … As diverse as we may be, we are united in similar goals and visions. The community Emily (Ruff) is working on not only will grow but I think will become important as need for this specialized knowledge increases. I knew and studied with Dick (Deuerling). He died last July at age 92. In another life he told me he would have been a plant taxonomist. He enjoyed that. Dick and (Dr.) Jose Gotts made quite a pair during Native Plant Society digs and the like.

What is the value in having a conference like this?

The value expresses itself in many ways. The first is being with like-mind folks, which means you don't have to explain everything and they can follow the train of thought. You learn how other people are doing things and what their experience has been. That's a huge learning experience. And you get to meet people who have made a mark in the herbalism world with their practice and advocacy. From them you get a distillation of thought, the essence, the high octane. That can not only fix your heading but save you time because you're getting quality information.

Is there anything you would like to add?

Yes, I think we should thank Emily for starting the conferences. They take a lot of dedication, hard work, and planning.

■

Recipes

Rosa's Nopales Salad

Photos by Josue Ibarra

My friend Rosa makes this nopales salad for family get-togethers and special occasions, like Thanksgiving.

Ingredients:

- Cactus pads, spines and glochids removed
- Tomatoes
- Onions
- Serrano chiles
- Cilantro
- Salt
- Lime
- Tostadas
- Red or white rice, or beans
- Liquid from chiles en escabeche, or pickled chiles (optional)
- Tuna fish or tiny cooked shrimp (optional)

Instructions:

1. Clean and cut the cactus pads (nopales) into strips or cubes.
2. Boil them with a pinch of salt for 15 minutes, then discard the water and wash them in cold water to remove some of the sliminess.
2. Mix in a bowl with chopped tomatoes, onions, Serrano chiles, and cilantro.
3. Add a pinch of salt and lime juice, along with a spoonful of chile pickling liquid (optional).
4. Serve on tostadas with white or red rice or beans, with queso fresco crumbled on top.
5. Variation: Add some drained tuna fish, or tiny cooked shrimp, to the salad.

Salt & Sugar Prickly Pear Pickles

Ingredients:

Prepared prickly pear pads (nopales)
1 tbsp sugar
1 tsp sea salt

Instructions:

1. Cut prepared nopales into 1/4" slices, and lay them on a flat surface.
2. Combine the sugar and salt, then sprinkle it over the prickly pear slices.
3. Let the pickles sit for 30-45 minutes, then rinse them well with cold water.
4. Blot the prickly pear pickles dry with a towel, and serve immediately. If you let them sit, they will get slimy again.

Recipes and photos on this page are by Wendy Petty, who writes at hungerandthirstforlife.blogspot.com.

Prickly Pear Gumbo

Ingredients:

1/4 cup lard
1/4 cup sorghum flour (or substitute other flour)
1 cup diced onion
1 cup diced nopales
3 cups water or broth
1/2 cup diced celery
1/2 cup diced green pepper
2 tsp paprika
1 1/2 tsp dried Monarda fistulosa (or oregano)
4 sprigs fresh thyme
1/2 tsp cayenne
1/2 tsp freshly ground black pepper
1/2 tsp salt
1/2 lb crayfish tails (or shrimp or chicken)

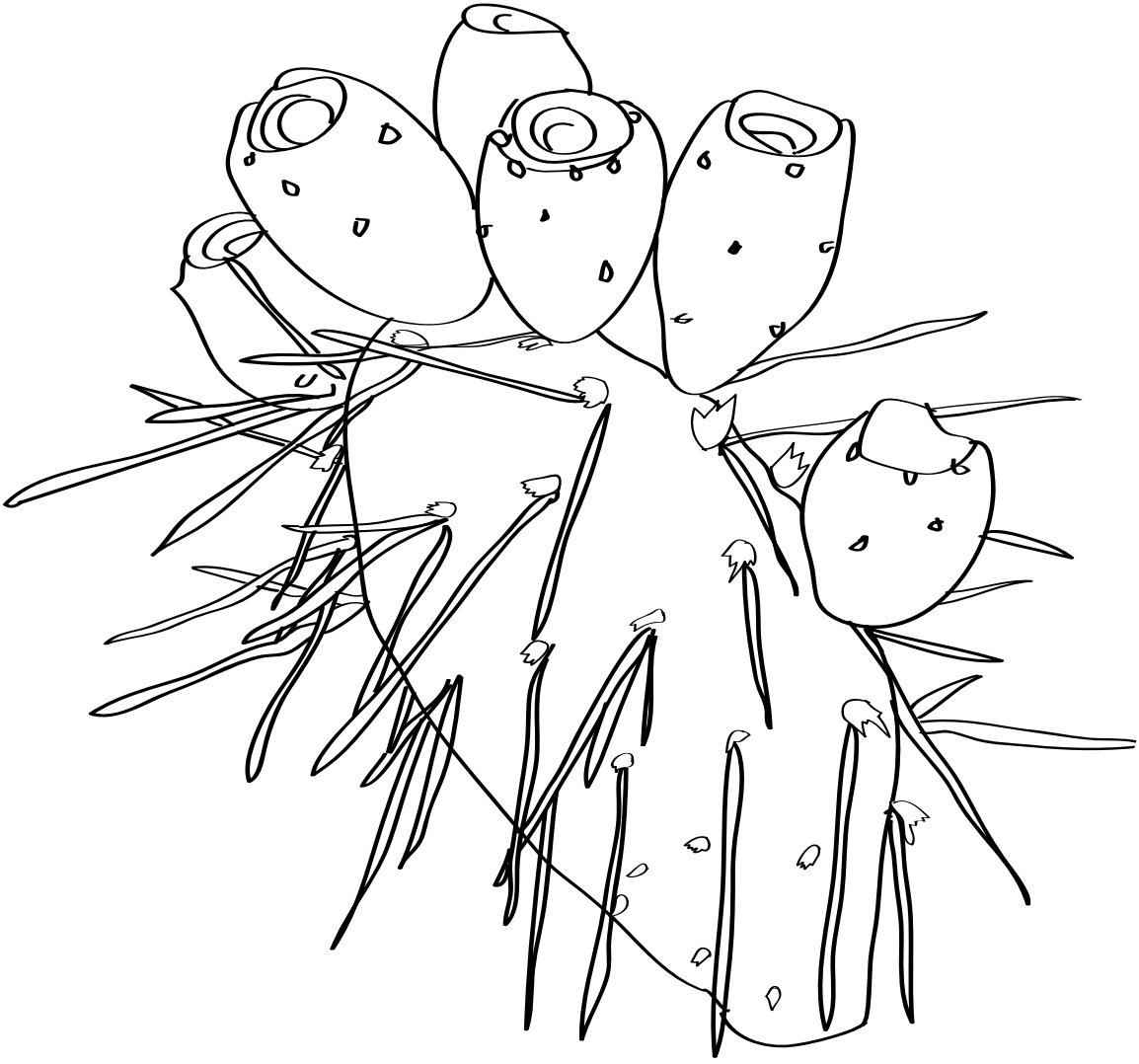
Instructions:

1. In a heavy-bottomed pan, melt the lard over medium heat.
2. Add the flour, and stir continuously until the mixture is the color of peanut butter, at least five minutes.
3. All at once, add onion, celery, green pepper, and spices to the pot, and cook 5 minutes until the vegetables are softened.
4. Add the water, stir, and reduce the heat to medium-low. Simmer for 20 minutes.
5. Add the diced nopales, stir, and cook for 10 minutes.
6. Finally, add in the crayfish tails and stir. Only keep the gumbo on the heat until the the crayfish tails have turned red and cooked through, no longer than 5 minutes.

"Tuna" Rolls and More

That's right, these are tuna rolls, and not yellowfin or albacore either. These tuna rolls feature prickly pear fruits as the star ingredient, known as "tunas" in Spanish. My friend Butter, who made them, has a good sense of humor. Which is why it was all the more hilarious the other day when she was telling the world on Facebook about some "tuna" sorbet with lime and tequila she was making and everyone kept commenting "Gross" and "Yuck" and she couldn't figure out what they all had against prickly pears. I mean, it was her own joke in the first place! Anyway, I say all this to say that if you find this crazy recipe idea enticing, or are searching for more preparation ideas for prickly pears or pads, check out her recipe roundup at: hungerandthirstforlife.blogspot.com/2012/09/wild-things-round-up-prickly-pear.html. Included is a recipe from Hank Shaw for Roasted Pheasant Glazed with Prickly Pear Syrup. Nom.

"Tuna" rolls and photo by Wendy Petty, but you might know her better as Butter.



Prickly pear
cactus