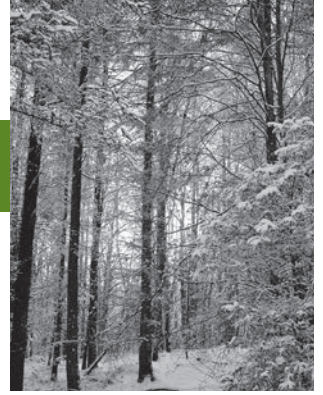


NATURE-ORIENTED PARENTING®

A guide for caregivers to teach children about the natural world

A Companion to the *Natural Inquirer*

...Be natural



Even the Robinsons Started Somewhere...

Surely the Swiss Family Robinson didn't shipwreck with a survival expert who knew exactly what berries and foliage to eat. They were forced to take chances and adopt a trial and error attitude towards eating and surviving. That's not to say that we should pop any old berry or mushroom into our mouths when we're hungry. Today, however, it's easy to learn what is edible and what is not, thanks to identification books, videos, and local naturalists and experts in the field.

Sometimes we simply don't have time to sit and read an ID book on a subject. The alternative is to participate in one of the numerous programs and demonstrations that are available at local nature and wildlife centers and museums around the country. Foraging for wild foods and survival skills basics may be learned by devoting several days or only a few hours on the weekend. You could learn a skill that might someday save your life!

In my opinion, the best way to learn the skills and basics of surviving in the wild is to work with an expert. There's nothing to compare with being in the field and being shown, firsthand, how to find the plants or animals that will sustain you if you're lost in the woods.

In the end, the Robinson family was forced into their life of simplicity and foraging, but luckily, we usually don't have to worry about a shipwreck. Our chance to learn what nature has to offer is as simple checking out your local nature center or museum for the next family program! *Adam DeWitte, Cradle of Forestry in America Interpretive Association Director of Education*

The Nature-Oriented Newsletter is designed for cutting out of the journal and taking home to share with parents or other caregivers. Please encourage students to cut along the dotted line, then take the page home to share with family or caregivers.

Wildlands Spotlight: Fungus Among Us

They grow in the strangest places, these mushrooms. All colors, all shapes and configurations, and most of which appear as if a Smurf will be exiting the stalk at any moment. With names like "Turkey-Tail," "Black Jelly Oyster," and "Bladder Cup," it's no wonder that most humans tend to stay away from formally looking for and cultivating mushrooms as a source of food. And with good reason, as some mushrooms can be extremely dangerous, causing serious sickness and possible death.

Mushrooms are *fungi*, a group of organisms that have more in common with molds and yeast than any flowering plant that you're likely to see in your garden. The part of the mushroom that you see above ground, typically called the *cap*, is actually the flowering part of the fungus that holds the reproductive properties, called *spores*. Most mushrooms that we see around the shady areas of our home have a round cap that can be slimy, rough and gritty, or smooth, which may flatten and shrink over time as the mushroom ages. Lastly, the mushroom may or may not have a *stalk*, similar to a regular flowering plant, which is used to help spread the spores as far as possible.

Now that you know what they look like, how do they grow? And why do they seem to pop up in the most unlikely places? The truth is that no one really knows exactly what mix of chemistry and luck produces a batch of mushrooms around your house, only that they will typically expand rapidly with the continuous absorption of water. Some mushrooms might grow overnight and disappear the next day, where others will expand, or "mushroom" to full size, release spores, and deflate in a matter of hours.

One thing is certain—whether it's a "death cap," "velvet-footed pax," or "saltshaker earthstar," mushrooms are to be given their due respect and left for the experts to identify. Simply touching some mushrooms can lead to sickness if the spores or outside coating get into your digestive system. Keep your distance, take a photo, and admire the beauty and uniqueness that can be found in the most unlikely of places! *Adam DeWitte, Cradle of Forestry in America Interpretive Association Director of Education*



I'll Have a Number Five, With a Side of Acorns

The next time your family is clamoring for a junk food snack in the afternoon, tell them to go take a hike—literally! The natural world is full of delicious (and nutritious) edibles that will satisfy any snack craving. Of course, many of us are familiar with the images of rows and rows of corn or fruit trees spreading through fields across the country under picture-postcard blue skies, but have you ever checked to see what's growing in the grocery store of your own backyard? From wild blueberries to edible acorns, the great outdoors are simply teeming with tasty delights.

Of course, caution should always be exercised when choosing from nature's delicacies. Many nuts, berries, and other forest items that look tasty can also be very poisonous. The possibility of eating a poisonous plant is why it is imperative that you first acquire a reliable resource to help you determine what is safe for your family to eat. Countless books and Web sites are available on the subject, and many offer regional information as to what you can find specifically in your area. You can also find cookbooks and recipe Web sites offering up creative ideas for preparing your personally collected forest food. One great example is *Edible Wild Plants: From Dirt To Plate* by John Kallas, Ph.D, which is a part of *The Wild Food Adventure Series* (<http://www.wildfoodadventures.com>).

Imagine that instead of your family spending another perfectly beautiful autumn day inside eating junk food, you could be out exploring and learning about the edible bounty that the natural environments in your region have to offer. The experience could continue when you got home with everyone pitching in to make acorn muffins, stinging nettle lasagna (really!), or wild blueberry crepes. Sure, it might be strange to eat something that you didn't find in a store, but the unique outdoor experience your family will share is certainly worth it.

Ashleigh Boice, Cradle of Forestry in America Interpretive Association Intern

Dandelion Fritter Recipe

(paraphrased as well as directly quoted from <http://www.learningherbs.com>)

- All you need to gather for dandelion fritters is just the yellow tops. Pick them midday when they are fresh and open. Be careful to avoid areas that may have been sprayed with pesticide or weed killer (such as concrete or very urban areas). Make sure to cook the fritters right after collecting the dandelions.
- Bring your basket of flowers inside, find a bowl, and mix together one egg and one cup of milk. Stir in a cup of flour, and your fritter batter is ready to go. (If you like your fritters sweet, you can add a little maple syrup or honey.)
- Now, prepare a skillet on the stove with gently warmed olive oil—keep it over medium heat.
- Rinse the dandelion tops gently to remove any dirt or other natural nondandelion bits from the flower (keep an eye out for the errant ant or beetle).
- Take one of the flowers and hold it by the greens at the base of the flower petals. Dip the petals into the batter and twirl until the flower is covered.
- Drop it into the skillet, flower side down. Continue dipping and dropping flowers, checking the first ones every once in a while to see if they are brown. When they've lightly browned, flip them over and brown them on the other side.
- When they're brown on both sides remove them from the skillet and place them on a paper towel on a plate to drain the excess oil.
- For a sweet treat, drizzle them with maple syrup, honey, jam, or powdered sugar. For savory fritters, try dipping in mustard or adding some savory herbs to the batter.

Ashleigh Boice, Cradle of Forestry in America Interpretive Association Intern

“What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

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