'Intro to Foraging' Guide

An extract from

Milkwood: Real Skills for Down-to-Earth Living

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THE WILD FOOD IS ALL AROUND US

The food is all around us. It's under our feet, along the path edges and next to the highway. It's in the sand dunes, all over our favourite park and down nearly every back lane. There's food out the back of the doctor's surgery, hanging over the fence. It's even between the cracks in the bricks of our patio. We just need to learn how to see it.

Foraging for weeds, wild food and feral fruit is a simple art and a pleasure that's available to absolutely anyone. You don't need a backyard, or a garden, or a farm – you can live in a high-rise apartment and still become a competent forager. All you need is a willingness to learn, good information and the eyes to see.

Foraging connects us with the world, and with each other, in many different ways. Pattern recognition takes up a large part of the human brain. Traditionally, learning and knowing the patterns of which leaves and berries to eat and which ones to leave alone was central to life (quite literally).

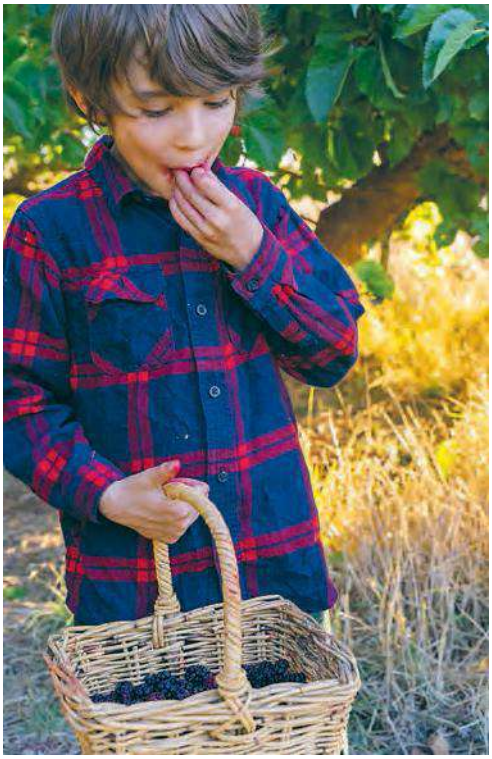
Once you know what you're doing, thanks to our capacity for recognising and remembering patterns, telling the difference between nettle and fat hen, or spotting a plum tree at a distance becomes as obvious as looking at a tomato. *That is clearly a tomato,* we think. *I know it has no poisonous close lookalikes, so I can happily eat this tomato without asking or checking with anyone, for I know that it is a tomato.* It's the same with foraging, once you get the hang of it.

Children are pattern engines of the most focused kind: this is different from that; this goes with this one, not with that one. As parents and carers, we have a huge influence on what patterns children learn from an early age. Foraging as a family gives kids the chance to use their clear-eyed abilities for pattern recognition to build life-long skills – this is a nettle; that is a dock leaf; that tree is a plum, this one is not. These skills will help nourish them in a very different way to learning the faces of Thomas the Tank Engine and all his friends. Take your kids with you when you go foraging and learn to see your local 'hood differently, together.

Kirsten's family spent many summers in the back gullies of the Lithgow valley, where Kirsten's mum was raised. Ruins of old shacks and houses from the early coalmining days are everywhere, now slowly being reclaimed by the Australian bush. These gullies were (and still are) peppered with feral fruit trees of European origin, both old and new. Some mark where a small home once stood and some are the result of birds dropping seeds.

'The bounty of these gullies can be immense, so each summer and autumn we'd load up the car with buckets, baskets and bags, and go out hunting. We had staked out the trees by noticing their blossoms in the spring, as Mum knew (mostly) by the flowers which were apples, plums, pears and all the rest. We'd make a note and then check back in late summer. Sometimes the harvest was small and sometimes it was huge. Pears and nectarines and apples for days – so much preserving! It was free feral fruiting, a family exercise that meant we spent a bunch of time helping and talking to each other as we picked.'

Foraging around where you live, or in a place that you visit often, also embeds you in a place like few other activities can. A map grows in your head of your local park, gully, headland or railway easement, with points



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: Visiting our favourite mulberry tree, down the road at an abandoned farmstead. Many an evening has been spent filling baskets with sweet berries in these branches!

TOP: A bowl of bitter wild greens ready to be cooked and eaten.

ABOVE: Gathering turkey tail mushrooms from fallen logs down the gully.

OPPOSITE: Taking kids foraging is a gentle yet powerful way to let them learn the patterns and tastes of the landscape they live in.

of reference that are different from how you would usually see the local environment. The patch of wild fennel, the boggy ground where the dock grows, the salty soak where there's always some samphire, that plum tree down near the bridge by the railway that fruits just before midsummer. It's a map of belonging, drawn with lines of food, seasonality and small discoveries of knowledge, collected over time. Foraging is a connection to land of the first, and possibly best, kind.

Foraging also connects our palates with our local terroir like few other foods we have access to. It allows us to source local, seasonal food with zero food miles and removes many of the unknowns about how that food was produced. We know what we're eating and what it took to get these greens, these apples, this fennel from where they grew and into our kitchen. And that is a very good thing.

So foraging is the story of us, as a people, as a species. Long before we cultivated land and kept animals, we foraged. And still, up until the last generations, we continued to forage, regardless of what was growing in our fields, because wild food is always different and it's vital. Different soil, different nutrients, different medicine – all good things to bring into our homes. Our ancestors knew this, and we can learn to remember.

A word about weeds vs indigenous plants

A weed can be defined as 'a plant out of place' – which is a pretty wide definition. Even native species can be classified as weeds if they grow vigorously in the 'wrong' spot. The word weed is highly subjective and often fraught with agendas. Most of the species that we forage for in Australia are 'weeds' – introduced species that have gone feral – from plum trees to dandelion. With a few exceptions (samphire, pigface and warrigal greens), all the plants outlined in this chapter originated on other continents and were brought here, intentionally or not, following the arrival of the British in Australia.

Australia has its own cornucopia of indigenous wild foods and cultivated crops that have been gathered and grown here for over 40,000 years. But most of these species are bound up with traditional knowledge, practice and heritage, which is for others to share. See the Resources section on page 293 if you'd like to learn more about Australia's long food history.

As permaculturists, we are careful not to view weeds as the random and recently introduced demon plants of doom that some people think many common weeds are. Weeds are plants. Many of them are useful – either to us or to the ecologies in which they root themselves. We prefer to look at plants for what they can give, and make the most of them. Foraging what we can – to eat now and also store for later – means less reliance on faraway food systems. It also allows us to adapt to foods that are immediately available to us, wherever we are, which is a useful skill.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Roadside verges can be the perfect space to harvest all sorts of things, like this flowering fennel.

THE RIGHT TO ROAM (OR NOT)

In some countries, the importance of, and therefore the right for, all to forage are enshrined in law. Sweden has *Allemansrätten* – the right of public access – which allows anyone to collect wild food and flowers from the forest (excluding any protected species), regardless of who technically owns that forest. Scotland has the 'right to roam' law, which allows anyone to use land, public or private, for recreation or to gather wild foods for personal use. Both laws require foragers to not destroy or disrupt any vegetation in the process.

In some other countries, the laws are the opposite. It depends where you live, as well as where and what you're hunting for. Sometimes it's considered trespassing, sometimes it's not. In Australia, it depends where you go – foraging in national parks is not allowed, foraging for pine mushrooms in state-owned pine plantations is fine, and gathering mushrooms in privately owned pine plantations is not.

In Australia, there are also 'threatened ecological communities', which are groupings of native plants that are protected by default, if they're found growing together, no matter where they're growing. The saltmarsh ecological community, which tasty samphire is a part of, is one example. However, if you find samphire growing on an urban coastal headland, just between where the backyards end and the rockshelf begins, and without any other significant plants around it, judicious harvesting is possible.

And then there are all the other spaces – the nectarine tree growing by the railway siding, the dandelion in the spare lot by the bus stop, the fruit trees down the gully, the fennel by the highway. Use your head and your common sense. Be safe, be careful and find out what you need to know about where you want to look. Always keep your eyes sharp for new plants, wherever you are. You'll be amazed at what you'll find.

BASIC FORAGING GUIDELINES

No matter what you're gathering and where you're gathering it from, ethical foraging comes with certain responsibilities and considerations.

Harvest leaf and fruit, not the whole plant

Being careful not to damage the plant you're foraging from is paramount. This ensures it's a resource for those who come after you, as well as ensuring that the plant continues to be healthy for whatever purpose it's growing there.

Observe and interact

As well as being a core permaculture principle, 'observe and interact' is good advice for foragers. Do you definitely know what species it is? Does the plant look healthy? Is it in an area that's likely to be sprayed by the council? If urban, is it in a heavy foot traffic and dog-walking (and therefore dog-pooing) area? These are all good questions to ask.

Consider the inputs around the plant

Many councils spray their roadside and parkland weeds and unwanted plants with herbicides to control their growth, despite the damage these chemicals do to many parts of the ecosystem. You can usually find out where and when this has occurred from your local council, and it's a good thing to consider before you go foraging. Streams are also worth looking into – if there's heavy industry upstream, which might contribute to significant heavy metal loadings in vegetation, it's best not to eat the greens that you find there.

Likewise, in country areas, try to find out what went on in the past. Most times it will be completely fine, but occasionally it won't be. We once found a great crop of nettles down by the woolshed and were happily eating them until someone mentioned that was right where the old sheep dip used to be, where the sheep were dunked in chemicals twice a year, meaning a very nasty toxin loading in the soil around that area. We stopped eating them and found another good patch of nettles in an open paddock up the hill.

As wild food lovers, we're happy to take our educated chances on eating what we find – you soon get to know what kind of areas are likely to be clean. The alternative is often eating fruit and vegetables that have been grown far away and had questionable inputs applied during growing or harvesting to prevent spoilage. We'll take the weeds and random feral fruit, thanks!

Tasty samphire to be made into pickles, from a local rock shelf. Always harvest lightly, no matter where you go.

FORAGING TOOLKIT

There are many plants that can be harvested easily and gently with a small sharp knife, but without one are nearly impossible to harvest without ruining the plant. Always take a pocket knife and a bag.

- A food map and a pen
- Gumboots (excellent for clomping over spiky blackberries and through long grass, especially in summer)
- Baskets, buckets or bags
- A pocket knife
- A bottle of water
- Small containers with lids

Public vs private land

Going into someone's yard or farm to pick fruit or anything else without asking is not okay, of course. But a fruit tree branch overhanging a public laneway is generally considered (by us and many others) to be fair game. Public parks and gullies offer little problems for foraging, as do headlands, public reserves and roadsides.

The art of asking

If you've found an amazing lemon, apple or persimmon tree that's technically on someone's block but seems to not be being picked, go and ask if you may. You'll be surprised how often you get permission. A big jar of home-made jam or preserves, returned to the owner, often seals the deal for next year's access – be brave!

Sometimes it's a case of being prepared to ask forgiveness rather than permission, such as in the case of crown land, like in the gullies of Lithgow. Or at an abandoned farmhouse that has a beautiful big mulberry tree alongside, with no one around to ask permission. If you're respectful in your attitude and in your harvesting, leaving everything as it was except for the fruit now in your basket, sometimes that's the best you can do.

If in doubt, go without

For fruits like apples and plums, there may be little doubt with identification – we're so familiar with these plants from the supermarket, media and our own backyards. However, for some wild plants and fungi, the forms of branch, leaf, fruit and berry may not be so recognisable.

If you find something that you 'think you've been told is edible but can't remember if this is the one', it's a good idea to pick a bit, take it home (uneaten) and do your research with the plant or fruit beside you. If you were right, oh, happy day. If you were wrong, it's just as happy a day that you didn't eat it.

There are some great pocket reference guides for weeds and wild food, so find one that covers the species you're likely to find. If you live in Australia, take particular note that many of our indigenous fungi are not well researched when it comes to edibility. Species can look like a common edible European mushroom when they are not. Go gently, take care, observe, test, confirm, and only then, taste.

Only take what you need

If the plum tree you've found down the gully is full of ripe plums, it doesn't mean you need to harvest 12 buckets if you will, in fact, only use three. Harvest three buckets instead and tell your friends where the tree is. Consider also that you may not be the only forager of this tree. Resources held in common good on common ground should be treated as just that – a common resource, not just for you.

Leaving plums on the tree is not wasting them. It's allowing for other possibilities, outside your small reckoning. Use what you harvest and use every bit. This is gratitude, and ethical foraging.

Mandarins overhanging a fence onto the street are fair game for gentle harvesting in our books, as are wild plums, self-seeded down the gullies where we live.

WILD FOOD MAPPING

In early spring, many fruit trees are a mass of flowers and easy to spot from a distance. It's a perfect opportunity to start plotting where the public food, feral fruit and other accessible delights of your area are situated. All you need is a map of your local area and a pen, or even just a notebook and pen.

You can add to this map all year round to create a valuable household resource, or even a community resource if you choose to share it. There has been an emergence of apps and websites doing just this in recent years – plotting public food and sometimes available excess from backyards and such.

We go walking in spring with a map of our local area and plot on our map the species (or our best guess) that we find. We also add any significant patches of other wild-ish foods we find, such as asparagus, olive trees or wild garlic. Then, as the seasons turn, if we don't have enough food with what we've grown ourselves, we head out and about, collecting. We quickly learn what

time of year the plums will be ready, or the mulberries. And when it's olive season, we go around and check the wild or public trees that we know of. Sometimes they're laden with fruit. Sometimes they're bare. That's the trade-off with wild food – in return for not needing to care for the tree or plant, you receive only a possible harvest. But with a good map, either in your hand or your head, there are usually other options around. Roll with the seasons, always be prepared and you will harvest much deliciousness here and there.

Once you've found and mapped all the feral fruit trees, likely mushroom haunts, and brambles, greens and berries, it's often a waiting game until they're at their best. Then they seem to come all at once and the business of harvesting, storing and preserving rolls into action as you make the most of these short windows of plenty.

More resources

TO GET YOU STARTED

Articles

First, you might like to read our full blog post that accompanies this free guide.

And then, we have loads more informative articles in our foraging food articles archive.

Facebook group

Need help ID-ing one of your wild food plants? Join our Milkwood Permaculture Community Facebook group, post a pic of your plant and ask our brains trust of awesome folks. We'll all do our best to figure it out with you.

Podcast

Interview with Robyn Wall Kimmerer on For.The.Wild – Indigenous knowledge for earth healing – brilliant, please listen.

Books

Milkwood: Real Skills for Down to Earth Living, Kirsten Bradley and Nick Ritar, Chapter 5 'Wild Food' – packed with tips for ID-ing plants, as well as recipes

The Weed Forager's Handbook: A Guide to Edible and Medicinal Weeds in Australia, Adam Grubb and Annie Raser Rowland (Hyland House, 2012) – top edible and medicinal weeds and uses – Permaculture Principles (AU) / Permaculture Principles (US)

The Thrifty Forager, Alys Fowler – one of our faves
The Forager Handbook: A Guide to the Edible Plants of Britain, Miles Irving (Penguin, 2009) – how and where to find wild plants, plus recipes

The Forager's Calendar: A Seasonal Guide to Nature's Wild Harvests, John Wright – great little guide

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