



# Incredible Edibles

When young and fresh, these weeds have incredible nutritional value.

By Anita Stone



*Nettles*

**F**rom nettles to kudzu, many of the weeds we despise can provide natural dining and add a touch of flavor to our meals. Most of the edible weeds are very common in gardens and yards. There is a stack of reading material that will teach us how to use these nutritious plants that many think are detrimental to the landscape.

Perennial **nettles** are of such highly nutritional value that they should be considered for planting—at least in a corner—unless they are already found growing wild. They are packed with vitamins A and C and contain iron, beta-carotene, magnesium, calcium, and potassium. Nettles provide energy that helps support the nervous system in times of fatigue and stress. Research

shows that nettles contain an organic salt, which is useful for anyone on a salt-reduced diet. This weed is popular in India, where it is used for kidney disorders, fevers, and chills. A cup of brewed nettle tea is claimed to help prevent colds and act as a home remedy for bronchitis, arthritis, and shortness of breath.

It is best to gather young leaves and tender tops of nettles in late spring before the plants begin to bloom. Using scissors and gloves, snip the greens, stir them in a bowl or sinkful of tepid tap water, and, with tongs, transfer them directly into a pot of boiling water. Cover the pot, and cook gently for 20 minutes. Drain the nettles, but save the water. Cooking destroys the stinging

qualities and converts the plants into wholesome food. Season the greens with butter and spices to taste, or dry them and add them to other vegetables as a flavoring herb.

Nettles should be collected and used, if possible, almost daily, not only because of the cleansing properties they provide but also for the flavorful taste when added to salads and other foods.

**Dandelions** are as nutritious as they are relentless and can provide many culinary treats. To quote herbalist Gregory



*Dandelions*

## Down-Home Dandelion Soup

- 1 parsnip, peeled
- 1 potato, peeled
- 1 stalk celery
- 1 yellow squash
- 1 zucchini squash
- 12 stalks dandelions
- 4 cups water
- Salt and pepper to taste

Dice first 5 ingredients. Bring all ingredients to a boil. Simmer 30 minutes. For a sweeter taste, add 2 chopped Vidalia onions and 1 can chicken broth. I like to serve this with biscuits.

A wine made from the older leaves and flowers is said to be excellent for digestion.

**Lamb's-quarters**, also known as wild portulaca or pigweed, grow on agricultural lands all over the world. They have been widely used for fodder as well as for human food. Once introduced into America from Europe, lamb's-quarters were widely used by Native Americans. Today this plant continues to be gathered and eaten in the spring. It is high in protein, calcium, and vitamins A, B, and C and is an excellent substitute for spinach.

The young leaves and shoots, like spinach, can be cooked or eaten raw in a salad. Later in the spring, young leaves at the top of the plant are fine for gathering, but the lower leaves will be quite bitter. As the plants mature, spikes develop and fill with tiny flowers and, finally, tiny seeds. As many as 75,000 seeds have been counted on a single plant. They can be eaten as a cereal, or dried and ground into black flour. History reports that during a time of scarcity Napoleon lived on black bread made from the seeds of lamb's-quarters.

Edible weeds are numerous. But if you gather wild greens from anywhere other than your own untreated lawn or garden, make sure they haven't been sprayed. Better to have a boring salad than one dressed with herbicides or fertilizers. 🍌

Tilford, "Dandelion is one of the most complete plant foods on Earth. All the vital nutrients are conveniently contained in a single source, in quantities that the body can easily process and fully absorb."

It is said that if dandelion plants grew in Tibet, we would send plant hunters to collect them and we would pay huge sums of money to nurserymen to propagate them. That said, growing dandelions has become a \$10 million a year industry. The plant is served in nearly 54 countries. The Germans make dandelion gravies to spread over potatoes. The French make gourmet salads featuring dandelions. The Greeks use them in traditional foods, and the Italians at almost any meal.

Containing more than 74 nutrients, just one cup of raw greens boasts more beta-carotene than the same amount of carrots, more potassium than a banana, more lecithin than soybeans, more iron than spinach, and loads of vitamins A, C, E, thiamin, and riboflavin, as well as calcium, phosphorus, and magnesium. Dandelions have a reputation as a liver tonic, blood purifier, anemia arrester, cholesterol reducer, and much more. The scientific name, *Taraxacum officinale*, translates as "official remedy for disorders."

Collect dandelion greens within your landscape or at least 75 feet from a road, to be certain they have not been sprayed with any chemicals. Begin picking the leaves in the spring before flower buds appear. Once flowered, the plant can be clipped back to the soil surface, and you can gather young greens that sprout, repeating this process all summer.

The best way to harvest is to cut the greens with the top of the root still attached so the leaves stay together. This makes them easier to clean. Wash the greens thoroughly to get out all the sand and grit, and discard any old leaves. Then cut off the roots and any tough stems, and wash again, lifting the greens out of the water to allow any sand to settle.

Do not dry the leaves, but place them in a pot with only the water clinging to the leaves and sprinkle them with a touch of salt. Cook them until barely tender, about 10 minutes. Drain them, and chop them very fine before adding them to salads or sandwiches.

The best greens will be those that grow in the rich soil of vegetable or flower gardens. If bitterness bothers your taste buds, it is easy to mask by serving the dandelions with breads and pastas, sweet dressings, or condiments such as lemon and garlic.

Dandelion roots can be dried, crushed, and toasted as a substitute for decaffeinated coffee. The main taproot can be boiled or pickled. During Colonial times, tonics were made from the roots, and the flowers were made into fritters or soaked in wine.



*Lamb's-quarters*