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The Geography of Food

An Edible World

Eating local foods has become a trend that has grown rapidly. There are many reasons for doing so, such as supporting local business, eating healthier, having a closer relationship with farmers, and regaining a connection to the land. There is nothing closer than being to the land than going out there and living off of it. Wild harvesting is about the search and discovery of what is out there, eating only that which we ourselves work for. There is a lot out there that we could collect, more than enough to fulfill the requirements of a basic diet. This diet is similar to that of the government supplied food pyramid. For my diet, what I generally need is the following: a source of carbohydrates, the main part of my diet, and a source of vitamins and minerals. There are many plants that have an abundance of such things, a source of protein and iron, to somewhat alleviate the need for meats, and a source of sugars, from fruits and berries. Harvesting edible plants from the wild and supplementing my diet with meat, dairy products, and oils that have been produced locally, could provide enough food to satisfy my nutritional requirements throughout the year.

My hometown of Portland Oregon lies at the top of the Willamette Valley region. While there are a lot of different ideas on what defines the Willamette Valley, I will take a few liberties and extend the region in which I search for my food. Most notably is extending my search to include a significant portion of the Cascade Mountain Range. This must be done, as much of the Willamette Valley region is now farmland, and the places where there are a lot of the wild plants are sanctuaries or reserves, and are places I would not wish to invade. The Columbia River Gorge area as well as the Cascade Range are different regions, but include many of the same plants that grow in the Willamette Valley.

There is an abundance of wild plants in this region, a few of those which are edible and those are highlighted here, as they are the primary parts of my wild harvest diet. Starting with starches, there is Yellow Pond Lily, *Nuphar polysepalum*, an aquatic plant that has many edible parts. The seeds can be collected in late July and once dried they can be kept throughout the year (Kirk 26). They can be popped like popcorn on a stove and eaten or ground into flour (Kirk 26). The root is also rich with starch, and can be boiled and peeled. They can then be dried and also ground into flour or consumed immediately (Kirk 26). Common Camas, *Camassia quamash*, is

also high in carbohydrates, and was an important plant for many of the Native American nations of the Pacific Northwest both as a food and as a trade item (USFS)(Pojar 108). The Dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale*, is an excellent source of iron and protein, nutrients that do not tend to be present in plants (Tilford 48). They also contain many vitamins and a wide variety of minerals as well (Tilford 48). Dandelions can be found through a large part of the winter, though by then they are often quite bitter (Duke 192). Stinging Nettle, *Urtica dioica*, contains iron, calcium, several other metals and vitamins A, C, and D (Tilford 210). It must be boiled or dried before being consumed in order to neutralize the acid contained in the small hollow hairs of the plant (Tilford 210). Burdock, *Arctium minus*, is another source of vitamins and iron, and the entire plant can be used as food in some way, whether it be steaming the stem, or boiling the leaves like spinach (Tilford 24). Western Hemlock, *Tsuga heterophylla*, and Douglas Fir, *Pseudotsuga menziesii*, the fresh needles from both can be made into tea that is high in vitamin C (Kirk 19, 192). For sugars, there are many different options available. One of the most popular is the Huckleberry, of which there are two varieties. There is the Black Huckleberry, *Vaccinium membranaceum*, and the Red Huckleberry, *Vaccinium parvifolium*. The Black Huckleberry is noted as “among the most delicious of all our *Vaccinium* species”(Pojar 57). Huckleberry leaves may also be dried, and can be made into a nutritious tea (Tilford 80). There are many more plants that are nutritious, the ones above are simply highlighting what one could find in the Willamette Valley and the Cascades.

While there is a lot that can be collected and consumed, some parts of my diet would have to be bought from local vendors. These things include meat, dairy, and oils. There is a way to obtain my protein from the wild through hunting and fishing. Hunting and fishing both take time, energy, and the space to transport the animal once it has been killed. They both require separate licenses and permits, which often cost a small fee. Hunting and fishing laws also define when certain animals can be hunted or fished, restricting when and where hunting and fishing is allowed and what is legal to hunt and fish. Obtaining the proper equipment and keeping it in working condition costs a fair amount of money. As such, alternatives such as shopping at the local farmers market for meat, dairy, and oils while potentially costing more in the long run are more accessible, especially important in the winter. Places where local meat can be purchased are quite easy to find in Portland. Portland has many farmers markets that feature local vendors, though some come from outside the Willamette Valley region. While the meat I would be

purchasing may not be from the Willamette Valley, it is more likely to be from the Northwest than meat one may purchase elsewhere.

Although there are a wide variety of plants that are edible, many obstacles make harvesting them difficult. The accessibility of plants is one such issue. It does not matter how abundant the plant is if there is a lot of it growing on private property. It would also be unwise to remove specimens from parks, sanctuaries, reserves, and protected environments. While having food is nice, getting in trouble with the law is not. Much of Oregon is publicly owned land, and can be accessed by the average person.

Transportation is also an issue that must be considered. While many plants can be found even within some parts of Portland, many do not, and a lot of driving would be required in order to acquire enough to last through the winter. Driving requires gas, which is expensive. The cost of transportation would be enormous, but could be offset by the money not spent on food in stores or at farmers markets. Driving also takes time, and the farther away the plants are, the less time there is to actually harvest them.

A car however would only get one so far, and searching on foot would be necessary. Hiking into an area and searching for the plants takes more time. A counter to this is that one could search for a specific plant, but at the same time collect plants that are also nutritious that happen to be growing in that area. Certain varieties of Huckleberry grow in the understory of some forests, along with young Western Hemlock trees, both can be collected in the same general area without too much searching. While plants may grow in the same general area, what time of the year each species grows is another obstacle.

Whether or not plants are in season dictates what can be collected. Some plants begin growing early spring, others during the late spring and early summer. Others produce fruits mid to late summer, and others grow almost year round. For some plants, such as Stinging Nettle, it is a good idea to harvest them before they bloom. While Stinging Nettle is blooming and afterwards, it develops gritty particles that can cause kidney damage (Tilford 210). Other plants lose their tenderness and become difficult to digest as they age. An example would be the Dandelion, which becomes bitterer as the plant ages (Tilford 48). Some plants can be harvested for one part early, but may later produce something that is also edible, such as berries or seeds. Deciding when to harvest can be a gamble, as there may be plenty in the short term, but one could miss the possible fruits or seeds of the plant in the future as a result. The biggest problem

is of course the winter season. Very little grows during the winter, and in order to have a supply of food I would have to process what I collect in such a way that it lasts. Berries can be made into jams and preserves, kept sealed in jars until needed. Seeds, such as the Yellow Pond Lily's can be dried, and stored in a dry place indefinitely. Other plants could be processed and then frozen for the winter when they could be reheated and eaten.

There are many plant species that contain toxins, which can easily kill cattle let alone a human. These plants are obviously ones that should be avoided, but that is not always easy. Death Camas, *Zygadenus venenosus*, looks very different from the Common Camas above ground. Their flowers look nothing alike, the Common Camas usually having blue flowers, and the Death Camas having a creamy white color (Pojar 108-109). Underneath the soil however, the bulbs of both plants are nearly identical, with one being poisonous and the other filled with good carbohydrates (Pojar 108-109).

The challenge that even expert naturalists face when determining whether or not a plant is safe to eat is identification. Having the right I.D. is critically important, as many plants appear similar at first glance, and the wrong I.D. can be deadly. Poison-Hemlock, *Conium maculatum*, which as the name implies is poisonous, can be mistaken for the very edible Wild Carrot, *Daucus carota*, and the results of this misidentification are deadly (Kirk 119). It takes a lot of practice to become good at identifying plants, and even those with lots of experience should always carry a field guide or two as a reference.

Pollution is another serious concern when harvesting from the wild. It is never a good idea to collect plants on the side of a road, as runoff from the road introduces many chemicals and heavy metals that can concentrate in the plants, making them toxic. There are soils in the west that can contain selenium (Kirk 3a). Most plants do not tend to accumulate it, but there are some that will absorb it and even some that need it in order to grow (Kirk 3a). If there is enough of it in the soil however, even plants that do not normally absorb it can, and at toxic levels (Kirk 3a). This is not to say that there is some plant out there that can be eaten without limitation, because eating too much of anything can be toxic (Tilford 8).

I believe that it is possible for me to survive on edible plants collected from the wild with a bit of hard work and time. On a larger scale, it may seem appealing to some, getting back to nature, really living off the land, but what is available in nature today is simply not enough to provide for the world. I feel that Donald R. Kirk sums up this conclusion best, "The land is not

fat”(Kirk 5). Wild harvesting is a great idea, working great on a small scale with much practice and experience. The skills required to feed oneself this way take a lot of time and practice to develop, and many people would not have the patience or time in order to hone their skills. It is sadly impractical for the average person today, as the amount of time necessary to find the plants, gather them, process them, and repeat this takes far too much time and energy. For those few who are willing practice their skills, spend the time searching for food, learn what plants grow where and when, and what parts of such plants are edible, harvesting food from the wild is a viable option for feeding oneself.

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