

Foraging: Local knowledge for fun, free, food security

By Amy Elbe

Imagine sitting on the back edge of an old Dodge station wagon with the tailgate open, your feet dangling over the edge and brushing the road as you bump slowly along an old logging road in Northern Wisconsin. You feel your teeth clack together in time with the bumps. You hear the crunch of gravel under the tires and the buzzing of crickets and cicadas singing the song of summer. The afternoon is hot, and the dusty rays of sunlight are visible angles between the trees. You are scanning the short, dense bushes along the roadside for the flash of blue that means blueberries! There! You shout for your dad to stop the car, and you scramble out before it stops moving to beat your brother to the best berry bushes. Oh, the sweet intense juiciness of the first berries you pop in your mouth before the rest go into your bucket. That is the flavor of summer!

My earliest childhood memories are filled with the flavor of summer blueberries, the smell of wet spring leaves and earthiness of morel mushrooms, and the crackle of fall leaves collecting hickory nuts. My family always had a backyard vegetable garden and spent time on weekends finding seasonal food in the local parks and woods. We never called it foraging. We just lived in tune with the seasons.

Foraging in its most basic definition means simply to search for food. With the rise of the world's population and increased public awareness and concern for food sovereignty, more people are interested in learning about the kind of foraging that I learned as a child. This expanded definition of foraging includes collecting food resources in the wild, including uncultivated plants, mushrooms, herbs, fruits, and nuts, that grow naturally in our surroundings.

I live in Dane County, part of the original lands of the Ho-Chunk nation. (1) Madison is the state capital and county seat and is an urban area of over a quarter million people with many surrounding suburban cities before it gives way to rural areas. Madison is in [plant hardiness zone 5b](#) which provides a growing season from early May through mid-October. This temperate climate combined with rich, loamy soil provides a long growing season for many vegetables, herbs, mushrooms, nuts, and perennial fruits. I feel fortunate to live in a location that has both a great climate and access to many local foraging experts who can fill in my knowledge gaps.

Dane County seems to be supportive of foraging on public lands. According to their [website](#), "Foraging for edible fruits, nuts, and mushrooms can be a fun way for you and your family to connect with the outdoors. It is allowed in the Dane County Park System as long as it's for personal use and not for resale." (2) There is an additional option to search for foraging as an activity and will show up as an option in 34 of Dane County's Parks. There is a list of fruits (such as apples and blackberries), nuts (such as hickory), and mushrooms (such as morels) that are recognizable to most people. In addition, the website provides details of in which parks they are most likely to be found and the time of year or growing conditions that are most favorable.

Foraging can take as much or as little time as you want. I love to spend time traipsing about in the woods and fields and finding trail nibbles is a bonus. I have favorite places that I return to

traditionally each year for specific foods such as Mother's Day morel mushrooms or summer berries or fall nuts. Other times I go to novel places and see what I can discover.

It is important to remember that all beings, including plants, fungi, and animals, including humans, are part of the web of life. When I spot the first plant that sparks my instinct to forage, I am reminded of the "Honorable Harvest" as described by Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Her ideas are rooted in Indigenous wisdom and include:

- Never take the first. Never take the last.
- Take only what you need.
- Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.
- Use everything you take.
- Give thanks for what you have been given.
- Share what you have taken.
- Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.

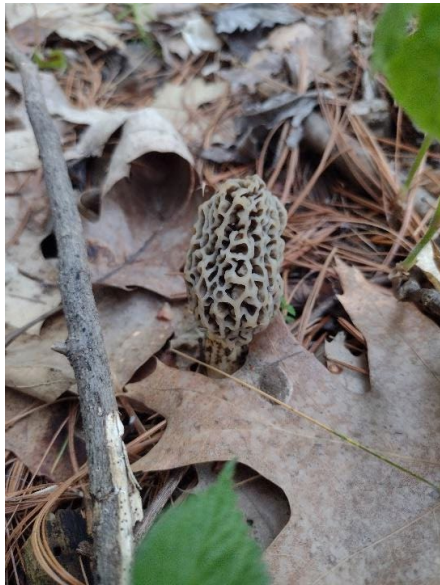
These principles emphasize gratitude, sustainability, and reciprocity, ensuring that the act of harvesting is done in a way that honors the plants and the earth. (3) I have heard variations of this wisdom repeated and reinforced in all my foraging experiences.

Foraging requires no special equipment, and you can do as much as your physical ability allows. It is important to learn accurate plant identification, what parts of the plant are edible, when to harvest, and how to make them taste good. Horticulture classes and weekend foraging workshops have bolstered my confidence in identification and given me a deep understanding of each being's place in the ecosystem. Let me take you through a typical year of how I foraged and grew my knowledge about safe, wild edibles. I'd like to show examples of how I cook and preserve the most common foods I forage.



Stinging nettles (Photo credit: Amy Elbe)

Wild greens are the first thing I forage every spring. Stinging nettles (*Urtica dioica*) are my favorite because they are one of the easiest greens to identify and they are plentiful and delicious. Whenever I go for a walk, I grab my garden gloves and a pack of paper bags for mushrooms plus plastic bags for greens. The nettles have trichomes (tiny hair-like structures). When touched these trichomes break off and act as needles injecting chemical irritants into the skin. I always wear gloves to pick them. The stingers are deactivated by cooking, blanching, crushing, or drying, so I blend fresh nettles into green smoothies, cook as a fresh green (like spinach), and dehydrate to use later as a green powder in soups and stews.



Morel mushroom and pheasant back mushroom (Photo Credit: Amy Elbe)

My Mother's Day request is to forage with my kids for morel mushrooms at my grandparent's farm in the Driftless Area in Southwestern Wisconsin. Morel mushrooms (*Morchella esculenta*) (left) are very distinct and easy to identify. The difficult part is finding a place to 'hunt' them as other foragers are very protective of this spring delicacy. Pheasant back mushrooms (*Polyporus squamosus*) (right photo) are often called 'poor man's morels' or the 'consolation prize' because they grow in similar habitats to morels. They make delicious mushroom jerky or sautéed in any stir fry.



Golden oyster mushrooms (Photo Credit: Amy Elbe)

I also forage in spring for wild onions known as ramps (*Allium tricoccum*) and often find them when I am hunting morels. This year I also found golden oyster mushrooms (*Pleurotus citrinopileatus*). Golden oysters are considered invasive, and foragers are encouraged to collect them and remove them in paper bags to avoid spreading their spores. I roasted a chicken in the slow cooker with wild ramps and wild mushrooms for a savory spring supper.

Through the spring and early summer, I forage the new growth of uncultivated greens such as dandelions (*Taraxacum officinale*), purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*), chickweed (*Stellaria media*), and curly dock (*Rumex crispus*).



Various mushrooms (Photo Credit: Amy Elbe)

My husband and I attended a retreat in Hiles, WI in July 2024. We camped at a local campground and attended multiple forays, presentations, and meals throughout the weekend. After each foray, the mushrooms collected by the group were laid out to be admired and identified by the group's mycologists. The edible mushrooms were identified, confirmed, and incorporated into the potluck meals.

We were so inspired that on our drive back to Middleton, we revisited one of the foray sites and were rewarded with two pounds of fresh chanterelles (*Cantharellus cibarius*) that had popped up 48 hours after an overnight rainstorm. I topped a gluten free pizza crust with herbed spread cheese, grilled chanterelles, caramelized onions, and sundried tomatoes for a seasonal summer pizza.



Chanterelles mushrooms (Photo credit: Amy Elbe)

My favorite way to measure time in the summer is based on the berries as they come into season. Strawberries (*Fragaria × ananassa*) are first, and the wild berries are tiny and sweet compared to their cultivated cousins in my garden. Next come mulberries. We are lucky to have a red mulberry tree (*Morus rubra*) in the common space in our neighborhood and it fruits for 10 weeks which is much longer than the invasive white mulberries (*Morus alba*) that are usually planted by the birds. Raspberries (*Rubus idaeus*) and black raspberries also grow both in my yard and wild in many local places. Blueberries (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), one of my favorites and a true sign of midsummer! Then blackberries (*Rubus fruticosus*) and elderberries (*Sambucus canadensis*) to wrap up berry season. I eat all these berries fresh by the fist full and the rest fill my freezer. If there are any berries lingering in my freezer by the next year, I strain them for juice to add to smoothies or make into jelly.



Thimbleberries (Photo Credit: Amy Elbe)

Berry picking is classic entertainment, and at least one berry will be fruiting from June through September. This year we had a bonus berry when we traveled to Glacier National Park in Montana in September. Thimbleberries! I thought they were unique to the shores of Lake Superior in Northern Wisconsin and Minnesota and Upper Michigan. However, we were up to our armpits (literally!) in thimbleberries (*Rubus parviflorus*) on a vacation to Glacier National Park this year over Labor Day weekend and feasted while hiking, always keeping an eye out for bears who might have the same idea!



Hen-of-the-woods mushroom (Photo Credit: Amy Elbe and Ty Elbe)

I am now confident in knowing where to find and identifying a dozen varieties of choice, edible mushrooms. In late September, my husband and I found ourselves in a mixed hardwood forest of primarily oak trees and thought we would see if there were any hen-of-the-woods (*Grifola frondose*) or chicken of the woods (*Laetiporus culphureus*) mushrooms growing amongst them. It was not long before we were rewarded with a giant hen. The portion we harvested was 4 pounds. I made hen alfredo, roasted hen with buffalo chicken dipping sauce, and a rich cream of wild rice and wild mushroom stew.

Positive identification is key! A good rule is to have at least three trustworthy sources for identification of any new plant or mushroom. These sources can include field guides, mushroom or plant clubs, social media sites that allow you to post pictures and descriptions for identification, other foragers or experts, and weekend workshops and retreats. My horticulture classes bolstered my confidence in identification based on my new understanding of soil structure, plant structure, and the learning to speak the language of plants. Identification is based on the plant size, shape, and structure and where and when it is growing and fruiting. It was helpful to learn this language in class, then find the plants in the forest, then follow up with a field guide with great photos and finally confirm with a friend!

Foraging can range from the simple act of picking wild berries to the more complex tasks of identifying safe mushrooms or digging root vegetables. Learning to identify foods like fruits (apples, pears, berries), nuts (hazelnuts, hickory nuts, black walnuts), and mushrooms (morels, giant puffballs) is common and can be done in many urban Madison locations. becomes invaluable, and a portion of the food you can gather for the rest of your life will be free! Once you

master the identification of common foraged foods, the knowledge becomes invaluable, and the food you gather will be local, healthy, and free!

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