

FORAGING

**How To Find, Identify, Harvest And Use
Wild Mushrooms, Wild Edible
And Medical Herbs!**



L U K E G R A H A M

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Table Of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1 – Mushroom’s Medicinal Benefits](#)

[Chapter 2 – Common Types of Mushrooms](#)

[Chapter 3 – Identification Basics](#)

[Chapter 4 – Preparing to Forage](#)

[Conclusion](#)

Introduction

There are numerous benefits to foraging for your own food. Finding and harvesting wild edible plants doesn't cost a penny. Wild edible plants are also higher in nutrients than the ones you buy in the produce aisle. A higher nutrition content also means better taste with more complex flavors.

Aside from the economical and health benefits, foraging for plants also helps you stay connected with nature, which can be very beneficial for your state of mind.

Today more than ever before, many people around the world are distancing themselves further and further from nature as they work, play and socialize indoors, where they can stay connected to electronic devices and enjoy the numerous conveniences of the modern world.

While foraging offers so many benefits, there are just as many potential hazards you can face if you harvest and consume the wrong wild plants. While most plants are harmless and will just taste foul if they're not fit for human consumption, there are plants out there that can make you severely ill and even kill you if you consume them. These poisonous plants mainly include various berries and mushrooms.

Therefore, before you venture out to forage for wild mushrooms, it is very important that you learn how to identify wild plants before you pick any up and consume them. There are thousands of different types of mushrooms growing in North America alone, almost all of which are edible.

However, some of the most popular and most desirable mushrooms out there have toxic doppelgangers. If you're not experienced at foraging, you could be facing some severe consequences. Taking this chance is not recommended.

In this book you will learn how to identify the different types of wild mushrooms, berries and herbs that are available in nature. You will learn how to become a forager and think like one.

You will also be given the unique tips that are shared by expert foragers

that they have gathered throughout their entire lives roaming around in the forests and searching for wild forest produce.

After all being able to see a plant and then be able to discern whether it is edible or not is a very valuable skill to possess. It might seem like a crazy idea at first for someone who has grown up in the suburbs or in metropolitan cities. But trust me, it is worth it.

Chapter 1 – Mushroom’s Medicinal Benefits

Mushrooms are actually types of fungi that grow in the wild. They are rich in vitamins and minerals and have a lot of health benefits. It is a well-known fact that if you consume fruits and vegetables, you will stand a good chance of reducing the risk of several health conditions that are lifestyle related.

It has been substantiated by several clinical studies that increase in the consumption of natural foods such as mushrooms can decrease the risk of suffering from obesity and its related diseases like diabetes and coronary disease.

Here are some of the medicinal and health related benefits of consuming mushrooms.

It is Beneficial for Cancer Patients

Mushrooms are known to contain very high amounts of antioxidants like carrots, green peppers, tomatoes, green beans, pumpkins, and zucchini.

Selenium is a rare mineral that is usually not found in common fruits and vegetables but are found in wild mushrooms. It plays the important role in maintaining proper function of the liver enzyme, and it helps to detoxify some of the carcinogenic compounds. It is also additionally known to prevent inflammation and decrease the growth rate of tumors.

Vitamin D found in mushrooms also helps to inhibit the proliferation of cancer cells by regulating the cell’s growth cycle. The folate of mushrooms plays a role in synthesis and repair of DNA, this helping to prevent the mutations in the cells that lead to it becoming cancerous.

It Helps Control the Symptoms of Diabetes

Studies have proven that the genetically caused type 1 diabetes patients who consume foods with a high fiber content have generally lower levels of glucose in the blood. This effect is also seen in some type 2 diabetes patients who have better blood sugar levels and lipid profile. We can obtain three grams of fiber by grilling a cup of portabella and stir frying a cup of shitake, both of which are types of wild mushrooms.

It is Good for the Heart

The potassium, the fiber and the vitamin C contained in mushrooms contribute to a healthier cardiovascular system. K^+ and Na^+ ions help regulate the blood pressure. Consuming them helps in lowering blood pressure and reduced the risk of hypertension and cardiovascular diseases.

It also helps regulate the cholesterol content and it can lower it by 5% as they are rich in beta-glucans.

It Increases the Immunity

Selenium is also proven to improve the response of our immune system to infections by helping to stimulate the production of T-cells. Mushrooms are rich in beta-glucan fibers which are found in their cell walls. These fibers helps fight cancerous cells and prevents the formation of tumors.

It Helps in Weight Management and Keeps us Satiated

One of the important role of dietary fiber is that it helps in weight management. It absorbs water and increases in volume thereby acting as a bulking agent in our digestive system. Mushrooms are known to contain two major types of fibers in the cell walls.

These are known as beta-glucan and chitin which both act as an incredible bulking agent and keeps us full and satiated. This helps reduce appetite making us feel full for longer hours which eventually leads to lower overall calories throughout the day.

Mushrooms are known to have a high nutritional values. It is an absolute wonder of nature that so many goodies can be packed in these wild fungi. Let's take a look at the complete nutritional profile of mushrooms to make an idea about the different minerals and vitamins that are packed in these naturally growing fungi.

Mushrooms are known to be naturally low in fat, sodium, cholesterol, and calories. They are often referred to as functional foods. In addition to the basic nutrients, they are known to reduce the risk of chronic diseases due to them being filled with antioxidants and dietary fibers which are beneficial for our health namely- chitin and beta glucans.

Mushrooms are packed with B type Vitamins such as thiamine, folate, riboflavin, niacin and pantothenic acid. They also happen to have the unique distinction of being the only vegan source of vitamin D.

Mushrooms are also rich in several minerals that may otherwise be difficult to find in our regular diet. These minerals include the rare selenium along with potassium, iron, copper and phosphorus.

Beta-glucans found in mushroom cell walls are a type of dietary fiber. Recently, they have been linked through extensive studies to have played a role in improving the resistance to insulin and lower blood cholesterol, reducing the risk of becoming obese and increasing immunity.

Mushrooms also contain something called Choline. This is an important nutrient that helps with sleeping, movement of muscles, and assists in learning and improving memory.

Choline also helps in maintaining the proper structure of cell membranes and it aids in the transmission of nervous impulses. It also supports the absorption of fat and reduces the risk of chronic inflammation.

Overall a cup of chopped or quartered mushrooms contain as much as 15 calories, 2.2 grams of proteins, a couple of grams of carbohydrate which includes a gram and a half of sugar, and 2.2 grams of fat.

Thus it is very important to maintain a certain level of mushrooms in your diet if you want to keep your mineral level to proper levels. The most popular way to cook them without wasting their values is by sautéing them on a hot pan with some onions or by grilling them on griddle pan till it is tender but still has a nice texture to it.

Chapter 2 – Common Types of Mushrooms

There are more than 10,000 species of mushrooms and that is only a fraction of what the actual number is projected to be. The different types of mushrooms can be classified into four major categories namely mycorrhizal, saprotrophic, endophytic and parasitic. These divisions are based on what the organism feeds on.

Saprotrophic variety of mushrooms are the ones that feed on dead and decomposing matter. They release enzymes and acids that help break-down dead tissues into easily absorbable molecules.

Thus all kinds of decaying plants, wood, and even animal carcasses can become a source of nutrition for these saprotrophs. These organisms are very important to the food chain and it is no surprise that this category has so many medicinal and gourmet mushrooms. Here are some examples:

- Morels such as *Morchella esculenta*, *Morchella angusticeps*, etc. are the elusive yet delicious mushrooms which are very popular among foragers.
- Reishi or *Ganoderma lucidum* is a prized mushroom in Chinese medicinal sciences. This organism is now the subject of extensive medical studies.
- Shiitake or *Lentinula edodes* is famous for its medicinal properties and also the great taste which makes it an absolute favorite among some of the world's leading chef.
- White Button or *Agaricus bisporus* is common among the supermarkets throughout the world. Americans consume about 2 pounds of these on an average every year.
- Cremini or *Agaricus bisporus* is another variety of the bisporus species which is super tasty.
- Oyster or *Pleurotus ostreatus* is a very popular variety of edible mushroom which has the property of reducing cholesterol.
- Maitake or *Grifola frondosa* is an edible mushroom that has the effect of reducing risk of tumors.
- Turkey Tail or *Trametes versicolor* is a tough variety that can only be infused in boiling water to make tea. It is known to have several medicinal values.

- Giant Puffball or *Calvatia gigantea* are large mushrooms which are edible only as young ones.
- Chicken of the Woods or *Laetiporus sulphureus* is a mushrooms that taste like chicken when they're young.
- Enokitake or *Flammulina velutipes* is easy to farm and often used in making delicious soups.
- Shaggy Mane or *Coprinus comatus* is one of the most unique looking mushroom that melts hours after it is harvested.
- Black Trumpet or *Craterellus cornucopioides* is one of the tastiest mushrooms known to mankind.
- Yellow Houseplant Mushroom or *Leucocoprinus birnbaumii* is famous for growing in potted plants.

Mycorrhizal variety of mushrooms are the kind of organism that have a great relationship with other trees. These fungi weave into the root cells or wrap the roots around themselves.

The mycelia then bring in additional phosphorus, moisture and other nutrients to the hosts. In return these things gain access to the sugars produced by the hosts. This allows the host to grow faster and bigger. Many farmers will inoculate their plants with a mycorrhizal variety of fungus for enhanced growth.

An whopping 95% of all plants are known to form mycorrhizal relationship with fungi. These types of mushrooms are difficult to artificially cultivate and are usually found only in natural environments.

- Porcini or *Boletus edulis* is often used to make soups and sauces.
- Truffles are probably the most expensive and sought after mushrooms.
- Chanterelles is another prized variety found on several parts of the world.
- Matsutake or *Tricholoma matsutake* is highly sought for its unique flavor and enticing aroma.
- Caesar's Mushroom or *Amanita caesarea* is a very popular mushrooms consumed in stately dinners in Italy.

Parasitic mushrooms are the ones that infect the host, derive nutrition from it and eventually kill it. Sometimes there is a thin line between saprophytic and parasitic varieties. Most of the parasitic mushrooms are too small to be noticed till they have actually killed the host. Some of the popular ones are:

- Honey Fungus of the *Armillaria* genus are edible and some of the are bioluminescent.
- Caterpillar Fungus or *Cordyceps sinensis* is a parasite that infects insects.
- Lion's Mane or *Hericium erinaceus* is a strange variety that possess spiny teeth instead of the cap. In addition to being consumable they are suspected to have a heal nerve like tissue.
- Chaga or *Inonotus obliquus*, while looks like a black mass, this fungus has a reputation of having medicinal values.

Endophytic mushrooms are fungi that partner up with plants by invading the tissue of the host. However, unlike the parasitic variety, the host remains relatively healthy and benefits from the increased absorption capabilities and pathogenic resistance. These can be easily cultivated in a lab setting without the presence of the host species.

This is also the most elusive and least studied variety of mushrooms. Many species do not even develop into mushrooms and their relationship with plants is not completely understood. Some mycologists even suspect that some parasites and saprophytes might turn out to be endophytes after all. Only time will tell what these things will emerge into.

Thus we can see that the mushroom world is filled with varieties that add to the plethora of medicinal and nutritional benefits that we can derive from these wonderful fungi.

Chapter 3 – Identification Basics

The ability to identify wild mushrooms is an amazing skill set to possess. This chapter will help you learn how to identify the edible mushrooms and much more.

Now before we get into the details of how to identify wild mushrooms let us get the basics right. It is important to remember that mushrooms are usually a fungus and not a type of vegetable or fruit. What we think of as a mushroom is actually like the “fruit” of a larger organism that includes thread-like roots called mycelium.

A Primer for Identifying Wild Mushrooms

Spring time is perhaps the most popular season in which foragers go out. The damp floor of the forest with a pile of fallen leaves is perfect for the growth of wild mushrooms.

The mushrooms that we end up cooking are actually like the fruit of a larger organism. The whole fungi consists of root like structures called mycelium and the fruit.

These are the four major body parts of a mushroom:

- The **Cap** is the umbrella-shaped part of the mushroom that sits on the stalk.
- The **Gills, spines, tubes and ridges** are what stays on the underside of the fruit like cap and it releases spores that reproduce new mushrooms.
- The **Stalk** is what the cap of the mushroom rests on.
- And finally the **Mycelium** is the root like structures that pushes the structure up for dispersal of spores and our foraging.

The basic primer on the different parts of the mushrooms makes it easy for us to identify the wild mushrooms when we are out in the field. To identify them is to demystify them.

The Four Foolproof Varieties of Mushrooms to Start Your Foraging

Identification of wild mushrooms requires us having awareness of the

basic parts. There are many poisonous varieties that look just alike. Just like with other aspects of nature, you need to start by learning a handful of the more definitive ones. The so called foolproof four are the best species to begin our foraging with. They are relatively easily identifiable. They are the famous morel mushrooms, the Chanterelles, the Giant Puffballs and the Chicken of the Woods.

Chanterelle or *Cantharellus cibarius*

The chanterelle mushroom is like a beautiful vessel with curled edges and is a delicacy of the wild. It has a distinct whitish yellow flesh. They have a fruity smell and gentle flavor that is really enjoyable.

The cap of the mushroom bears an orange or yellow color with curved edges that looks wavy from the sides. The middle dips inwards into itself. The younger varieties have less curled feature with a flatter top.

The gills are on the underside and they can be smooth or wrinkled or even lined with orangish gills. The veins are connected among themselves.

The stalk grows from a solid light orange or even pale yellow structure that tapers at the bottom. The spores of the mushroom are yellow in color.

The size of these mushrooms are medium to quite large when they reach a mature age.

Their foraging season can begin from fall to early spring.

Morel or *Morchella esculenta*

Morel mushrooms are one of the most popular and prized edible ones out there. They are known for a honeycomb texture in the cap and a rich flavor.

The cap of the fungi is brown and it can be oval or even conical in shape. The texture is wavy and honeycomb like with dark brown holes on the cap.

The gills are not really apparent. While the stalk is tan colored and hollow.

The size varies from one to twelve inches in height.

They are most commonly found in the springtime.

They tend to grow on ground among the bed of decaying leaved in the woods, and in sandy soils near rivers. Wet and dam areas are conducive to their growth.

The Giant Puffball

The puffball is true to its reputation of looking like a puffed up balloon or a ball. It is round in shape. They are best for consumption when the flesh is firm and looks white inside. The yellow or greenish ones are known to cause a stomach upset. The flesh looks bright white when young and brown or green when they mature.

The cap is thick skinned and white with light brown marks all over the body.

The gills are practically absent and it grows without the help of a stalk. These organisms can grow up to 10 inches or more in diameter.

The foraging season is from summer to fall.

They mostly grow on the ground in very grassy fields or even in open lawns or on rotting woods and hillsides.

Sulfur Shelf or Chicken of the Woods

These are a group of semi wrinkled shelf like structures that are stacked on top of one another. It is known for its distinct flavor which makes it taste like chicken. The flesh is yellow to light orange and these can be very watery from collecting dripping moisture from trees.

The cap is usually yellow or orangish with a shelf like structure that is stacked on top on one another. When ripe they are damp and their texture is rubbery. Older ones have a lighter color and is hardened like wood.

The gills have a bright yellow color with pores underneath their surface. The stalk is usually short and stubby. It is connected to the bark of the tree thus making it seem stalk-less altogether.

The shelves can be up to 20 inches in length.

Their season is usually from late summer to fall season.

They can be found on the woody barks of deciduous trees such as beech, willow, oak, cherry, chestnut and willow. They start growing from the base and they move up the bark.

As you develop the passion of foraging for wild mushrooms, it is important to remember that it is after all a journey of a lifetime discovering all kinds of magical things.

Chapter 4 – Preparing to Forage

Many of us do not realize this but there is such a thing called free lunch. Well, almost free! With a little guidance and some specialized knowledge you can easily learn the art of spotting edible plants even in the city.

First you need to know something about the art of foraging and about wild plants. They are really easy to identify. In this chapter you are going to learn how to be able to think like an expert forager. It is not about learning botany but about the tasty plants and mushrooms in your area.

The main rule of foraging is that you should **never, ever consume a wild plant without a consulting a local expert**. It is really not that difficult to locate a local expert by looking up the phone book or online in one of the plant societies of the town.

These people are super passionate about all kinds of plants, especially the ones that are native to that place. It is best to go on a field trip with them and learn about what they're saying. It is not so easy to build the confidence to forage on your own unless there is someone to guide you and even eat the plant in front of you.

It is not absolutely impossible to learn about foraging from online communities but they can be a dangerous affair as first-hand experience counts. Even if there are no local plant societies you can ask the librarian to help you get in touch with one.

The next rule is that even after you have picked the right plant and the expert agrees with you, **try only a little**. You may want to eat it but it may be unsuitable for your body. There is a reason why many edible wild varieties do not end up in the vegetable market.

People have reactions to different kinds of plants that may be particular to them. You can be allergic to them. Try only a little. And do not forget to carry an anti-anaphylactic injection with you.

There is a good system to go about the consumption of a plant after you have identified it. It can be summarized through the acronym ITEM. Firstly you need to **I**dentify the plant beyond an iota of doubt. Next you need to make sure that it is growing, which means is it the right **T**ime of the year to be foraging for it.

The third step is to check out the **E**nvironment. This really means you need to check two things. One is to make sure that it is growing in the right place and then you need to make sure that it is getting clean water and unpolluted soil. Finally you need to know the proper **M**ethod for preparing it.

ITEM can be thought of as four obstacles that you must overcome in order to consume it. You cannot eat a plant unless you have eliminated all the four obstacles. If you're stumped by at least one obstacle then it is a warning sign for you to not eat it. You have to resolve all four components of the acronym and check all of them before you can consider it consumable.

Additionally there are six other guidelines to help you forage like an expert and think like one. The first rule is that if it both looks and smells like a mint then it must be a mint and it is edible.

If it looks like one but doesn't smell familiar then avoid it. The same rule can be applied to bulbous plants like garlic and onion. If the looks and smells don't go with each other then you must avoid it.

The second rule is that almost all kinds of plant that have a white colored sap is inedible. There may be some exceptions. But the white sap is a definitive warning sign that the plant is NOT fit for consumption. As for white colored berries, almost 99.99 % of those are toxic. Do NOT eat them.

The third rule is that all kinds of mustards are edible. Some have better taste than other but they are all edible.

The final rule is that all kinds of mallows can be eaten in some way or the other except cotton. The edible part of the plant will vary but other than cotton plant the rest are all edible.

Thus you can safely and easily learn how to forage and a world full of plants is waiting to be explored.

Chapter 5- All About Foraging Wild Berries

We consume a lot of berries at world-class price tags in fancy looking departmental stores and supermarkets. Berries are rich in vitamins and minerals and provide a quick boost of energy because of their natural sugar content. What we do not know is that these berries are all available in the wild.

In order to do that you need to think like a bird who are the intended target of the plant cause that is the only way it can distribute its seeds far and wide away from its mother plant. Berries commonly grow in bushes and creepers.

Berries that grow on creepers often extend above the green leaves on tall stems which attracts high-flying birds like jays. You need to search for them in meadows and rivers and by the margin of ponds. They even grow on the power lines.

You need to be well experienced to harvest berries. You must avoid all kinds of vine berries except for wild grapes that grows on trees, and the fruits that are found in clusters and have twisted tendrils and leaves that have serrated margins.

Most other forms of wild vines are actually poisonous and hard to differentiate from the ones that can kill you.

Foraging season is during summer although some berries grow during the spring and even in fall. Many of them can also be found till winter. Here is a list of wild berries that can be easily found.

Blueberries appear to be purple and red. They are round or oval shaped and seedy fruits that measure half an inch to a full inch. They taste sweet and even sour. There are almost hundreds of species of blueberries and they are all edible. They can be of the longish darker blackberries and rounder raspberries that easily pull off the stem or the round cap they are attached to.

The huckleberry variety grows on woody stems and round bushes. It has white bell shaped flowers that grow in spring and summer they blossom into blue fruits.

The blueberries need acidic soil to grow and oak trees can point to good blueberry growing land.

One should however be careful of the toxic pokeweed berry which a very similar look but grows instead on rough shrubby bushes with long leaves. They are glossy and dark purple or red in color. They are similar to blueberry in size.

Elderberries have flowers that bloom in a dozen of white colored blossoms known as elderblow. They are followed by a lot of dark red berries well into the summer season. You need to wait till they are juice and ripe. They can be toxic when they are eaten unripe. They can be cooked into a jelly. They give flavor to apple wine and syrups.

They need a rich top soil to grow and they can be found in damp woody forests at the boundaries of fields and along forest roads. They bloom during the late summer months of June and July.

Wild Cherries such as black cherry and red choke cherry are small round in shape and red or blue in color. They spray on short trees. Younger trees have shiny reddish bark. The fruits are small and juicy. Chokecherry grows in similar ways but is instead a bright red in color. It can taste bitter to sour but it can add unique flavors to wine or jelly.

Cherries usually blossom in springtime and the fruits grow in summer up to fall. The wilted leaves and oval seeds of the cherries are highly poisonous as they contain Hydrocyanic Acid.

Cranberries is a fruit that is native to North American forests. It looks like a round red fruits with very soft seeds. It was very popular among the colonizers who sent barrels of this fruit to England.

They grow best on acidic soils and on the northeastern mountains. It is known to ripen in the fall and stays on over winter,

Serviceberries or Juneberries are red in color and found in the east while the Saskatoon variety is found in the north-west and dark purple in color. Service berries are sweet and juicy although some may need some cooking to taste better.

They grow on small twenty foot trees on well-watered soil often near streams. They have beautiful snowy white flowers in spring and the fruits ripen in late summer.

Wild Strawberries are a smaller version of the domestic variety though the wilder ones are known to be sweeter and more beautifully fragrant. The leaves are serrated and dull unlike the shiny poison ivy.

They are found growing in the fields and everywhere the birds can possibly excrete them. The wood strawberry grows under shade although it is not as tasty.

The wild strawberries flower in a white five petal blossom in early spring while the fruit ripens going from green to pink and even red in the month of June.

You can always rely on Mother Nature to provide you with the bounty of beautiful berries and fruits that have great nutritional value and healthier compared to the farmed ones with pesticides sprayed all over it.

Conclusion

Foraging is becoming a trend among more and more people. They are going out and looking for wild food that are both healthy and delicious. Foraging puts us in touch with nature and the old hunter gatherer way of life that our ancestors used to have.

The consumption of raw food is a very healthy habit that many people are getting into and they are collecting all kinds of wild edible plants and mushrooms. There is always plenty for everybody and Nature has given us all enough to share. Many of the sought after plants have medicinal values.

God wants all of us to lead a happy and healthy life and have thus blessed us with free medicines and food all over earth.

Besides mushrooms and berries that are well talked about in the previous chapters there are several edible plants and weeds that have great nutritional and medicinal values.

There is the famous **Dandelion** which is one of the most famous nutritious weed out there. Then there is **Chickweed or *Stellaria media*** that grows in gardens or can be cultivated on the ground. It is available in winter and tastes wonderful when eaten fresh as a salad.

The **Shepherd's Purse** is a common variety of weed that can be easily recognized by the conspicuous heart shaped pods. Like chickweed these can be found all year long and are very popular in Chinese markets. The **Common Mallow** is another weed that is cosmopolitan can be eaten raw.

Their leaves however taste great when cooked like collard greens. The **Bladder Champion** is a wild flower that is found along the path of grassy places and can be eaten both raw and cooked. The leaves and flowers are both edible and highly nutritious.

Then there are edible herbs that have medicinal properties as well. The **Fennel or *Foeniculum vulgare*** grows amidst wastes and along roadsides. They have a fern like foliage and has an anise seed-like flavor which can be eaten raw in salads or used as a garnishing agent. Fennel seeds make an amazing herbal tea.

The **Milk Thistle or *Silybum marianum*** is of the same variety. The leaves

are stripped and the prickles can be eaten in salads while the seeds make excellent herbal tea. Milk Thistle is easy to identify by its white foliage and purple flower.

St. John's Wort or *Hypericum perforatum* is not edible but is popularly used as a medicinal herb that can treat depression. It has star shaped flowers that are golden in color. It blossoms in summer and can be found on waste lands.

Foraging is a very easy activity that can be very rewarding. It keeps us fit from walking along the countryside and inhaling plenty of unpolluted air. It is a free source of food that are both nutritious and medicinal.

The best foraging experience is when you start with easily identifiable species and then learn from the more experienced people who forage in the same area. I hope you enjoyed reading this book and found this information useful. Happy foraging. Mother Nature awaits you!