FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Cooking

The Neighborhood Forager: A Guide for the Wild Food Gourmet
Robert K. Henderson
Chelsea Green Publishing Co.
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The famous wild-foods writer Euell Gibbons may have stalked the wild asparagus, but now comes Robert K. Henderson to stalk not only wild greens and nuts but domesticated day lilies and Japanese maples, too.

Henderson has written what may be a unique field guide—a book extolling the virtues of combing yards, lots, and alleys of suburban and urban neighborhoods for gastronomic pleasure. Suburbanites interested in health, home brewing, and wine making make up a good deal of the interest in wild edibles, he says, yet most guidebooks emphasize rural settings.

Henderson claims there's actually greater diversity of plants to eat in established neighborhoods than the average forest or meadow because of weeds and intentionally introduced exotics. He even teaches how to identify different habitats, as other guidebooks describe the differences between swamp and dry meadow ecosystems. Nut trees, for example, are most often found in "porch swing and back alley" neighborhoods.

There are cautions, too, on the pitfalls of eating suburban plants: Some species tend to be sprayed with pesticides. He urges talking to neighbors to find out if they use chemicals and to make sure they don't mind if you forage a few horseradish-tasting magnolia buds or lemon-like sumac berries.

Henderson, who has written for Countryside, Herbs for Health, Backwoods Home and The Herb Companion, infuses his book with a keen sense of humor and infectious enthusiasm for wild-food foraging: "I would especially like to thank my mother, who suffered raised eyebrows of others when I forgot my lunch in grade 6 and foraged one from school yard weeds," he says.

Henderson calls the tangy, just-opened leaves of Japanese maple, a common landscape plant, “one of suburbia’s most surprising wild edibles.” After being picked for a few hours, though, they lose that distinctive flavor and “begin to taste like, well, leaves,” he says.

His book is filled with history, folklore, growth habit, taste differences, and nutritional/medicinal values of different flowers, shrubs, weeds, edible roots and greens, trees, nuts, and fruits. He offers harvesting and preserving tips, ways to use plants for natural dyes, foraging advisories to identify poisonous plants and more than thirty recipes. While he urges readers to use his book with other field guides, The Neighborhood Forager offers a good start with clear descriptions, 100 photographs, and line drawings and tables showing the principle uses of nearly 145 types of plants and their seasonal availability.

He says the motivation for foraging wild foods is the same as that for the “well-heeled” who try different restaurants in order to experience new taste sensations. “The sole difference between foragers and restaurant hoppers is the effect our respective hobbies have on our bank accounts.”

Diane Conners