

SHOW-ME FLAVOR

RESTAURANTS, RECIPES, & CULINARY CULTURE

# HILLBILLY BOTANIST

OZARK HIGHLAND LOCAL CARRIES ON AN OFF-THE-LAND TRADITION | *By Paul Hagey*



PAT FRENCH, SASSAFRAS LEAVES (FILÉ)

PAUL HAGEY



IN THE MISSOURI OZARKS, hills and hollows grow into each other. And for a moment one evening, at the intersection of two small ridge-top highways, they merge as time pauses, and the expanse of body and land come together in a flood.

That quiet and those hills spread over the fifty thousand square miles known as the Ozark Highland, the only extended highland found between the Appalachians and the Rocky Mountains. The region's dense topography and remoteness allowed the Ozarks, over half of which lie in Missouri, to develop a rich ecology as well as a distinctive culture.

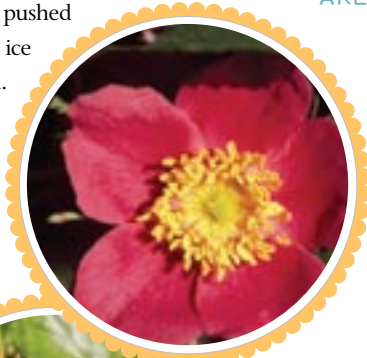
Twice in geologic history, the Ozarks were uplifted into a plateau, which prevented encroaching seas from submerging the region for its last 245 million years. Glaciers

did not proceed far enough south to smooth over its topography, denude its land, or layer it with till. The Ozarks thus became a refuge island of plant communities pushed out of surrounding areas when ice crept south or seas flooded north. Consequently, its flora is the most diverse, endemic, and species-rich of Missouri.

This flora flowered in Ozarks culture in various forms.

Chicory coffee, prickly pear fruit syrup, Indian lemonade (from sumac berries), poke artichoke dip, and spice bush-flavored carrot cake were some of the Ozark wild-edible-

THE FLOWERS AND HIPS, OR SEEDS, OF ALL TRUE WILD ROSES (*ROSA GENUS*) ARE EDIBLE.



NUTS THAT CAN BE USED AS WILD EDIBLES INCLUDE ACORNS, HICKORY NUTS, AND BLACK WALNUTS.



PAUL HAGEY, COURTESY OF ©ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

POKEWEED



THERE ARE A GREAT ABUNDANCE OF BERRIES AND FRUITS INCLUDING: BLACKBERRIES, ELDERBERRIES, WILD GRAPES, SUMAC, PAWPAW, PERSIMMON, AND WILD PLUMS.



ROSE VERBENA

plant dishes Pat French brought for tasting at an Ozark wild edibles lecture she gave last summer. The chicory coffee grounds, light brown and made from dried and ground chicory root, were surprisingly sweet with a slightly bitter aftertaste. The electric purple prickly pear fruit syrup, though a little less sweet, tasted unexpectedly like honey.

Pat lives in northern Arkansas just south of the Missouri border and has spent a lifetime in the Ozarks. At fifty-four and recently retired from the Missouri Department of Conservation, she lectures on Ozarks wild edible flora: how to prepare and identify certain plants and when and where to harvest them. She calls herself a “hillbilly botanist,” having grown up using Ozark plants for food and medicine. “There’re botanists and those that know a lot about plants, and I

very much respect them,” she says. “They study them, they know all about their characteristics and taxonomy, but sometimes if you get them out in the woods, they’re not necessarily going to know which plants you can eat or what you can use them for.”

Pat grew up in the Irish Wilderness, a 16,500-acre area deep in the Missouri Ozarks in which Bishop John Hogan founded a settlement for Irish immigrants in the mid-1800s. He wrote then of the area: “Nowhere could the human soul so profoundly worship, as in the depths of that leafy forest, beneath the swaying branches of the lofty oaks and pines, where solitude and the heart of man united in praise and wonder of the Great Creator.”

“We rarely bought food,” Pat says, recalling her time as an early-’60s child in that

wilderness. Her second grade class, she remembers, was the last in its one-room stone schoolhouse, which sported backward s’s in “Wilderness School” inscribed above the doorway’s lintel. When the school, which still stands today, closed, she and her classmates were bussed to a small town thirty miles away where they were known as “the wilderness kids,” Pat says.

Her mother’s squirrel-hunting, fishing, wild-plant-harvesting, and traipsing-through-the-woods lifestyle was not always understood by Pat as a child. But in her thirties, a deep respect for it emerged and has grown into a passion. In her work now, she says she honors her mother and grandmother, who passed on to her, along with some Cherokee blood, an intimate relationship with the land.

PAUL HAGEY, COURTESY OF



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THE FLOWERS  
AND LEAVES OF  
WILD VIOLETS  
(*VIOLA* GENUS)  
ARE EDIBLE.

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At Pat's thirty-six-acre bluff-top Ozarks home in Arkansas, plants native and exotic spread out from her doorway. Blackberry, elderberry, bittersweet, beauty berry, blue false indigo, black and blue sage, hollyhocks, horseradish, stevia, Solomon's seal, and wild petunias are a few plants that inhabit the various gardens layering up a hill-lined path leading to an enclosed vegetable garden. Walking along the path, Pat points out a type of *Desmodium* plant. "When I was growing up my mom would make tea out of that for stomach cramps," she says.

Below the back porch of a guest log cabin her husband built spreads a glade, which Pat

restored by prescribed burning. Exposed to sunlight, the glade is now dense with native glade plants sprouting and growing on their own from seed- and root-banks remnant in the soil. From the elevated porch, the land gently slopes down to a one-hundred-foot-high bluff that drops into a branch of Spring River. Across the river in the distance, a long ridge marks the background of the river's valley below us.

Pat begins listing the species of plants she spots in the glade. "There's bee balm, there's echinacea, sunflower, New Jersey tea, wild quinine," she says, pointing them out as she names them. "See all the butterflies on the plants, lots of birds, lizards, and frogs? You know you're doing the right things when you have all those critters."

As we lean on the porch-railing and look

into the glade, the river valley, and far-off ridge, Pat says that eating wild plants is not only about physical nourishment but also about connecting you to the land and its culture in ways that might teach you more than you might be aware of. "Once you learn about plants and how they grow and what affects them, you learn the whole process," says Pat. "It is a holistic experience."

Pat reflects on this Ozarks legacy. "I'm worried about our kids," she says. "I don't want to think that I'm going to be gone someday, and people like me are going to be gone someday, and nobody else is going to know any of these things." After one of the ten lectures she gave this summer on wild edible plants, a group of kids approached her after the talk. Of the interaction, she says, "It just made my heart sing."



# COMMON OZARKS WILD EDIBLE PLANTS

The plants below contain both native and non-native or introduced species.



**BEE BALM** (various species of the Monarda genus) (Other common names are Oswego Tea, Wild Bergamot, and Horsemint.) The flowers and leaves, gathered in the summer or early fall, are used fresh or dried for tea.



**CHICKWEED** (*Stellaria media*) Its leaves and stems are used. They can be used fresh, cooked as a vegetable, or raw in salads.



**CHICORY** (*Cichorium intybus*). Other common names are Succory, Blue Sailors, Ragged Sailors, and Witloof.) Its roots are used in summer and fall. In spring, its leaves are used fresh, frozen, or canned as a vegetable; the roots are dried, roasted, and ground as a coffee substitute.



**DANDELION** (*Taraxacum officinale*) Its root, young leaves,

buds or crowns, and flowers are used. The early tender leaves, roots, and flowers can be eaten as a fresh vegetable either raw or cooked. The young leaves are good in salad. Roots can be dried, roasted, and ground to make a coffee-like drink.



**DOCK** (various species of the Rumex genus. Other common names are Curly Dock, Common Dock, Sour Dock, and Yellow Dock.) Its very young leaves are used and are gathered in the spring. It is normally cooked as a green.



**HENBIT** (*Lamium amplexicaule*) (Other common names are Dead Nettle, Dumb Nettle, and Archangel.) The plant parts that are above ground are used and are harvested in early spring. It can be used fresh in salads, cooked as a vegetable alone, or mixed with other greens.



**JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE** (*Helianthus tuberosus*) (Another common name is Sun Choke.) Its tubers are dug in the late fall

after a killing frost. They can be used fresh in a salad or cooked as a vegetable. Tubers can also be combined with fruit as a dessert or can be pickled.



**LAMB'S QUARTERS** (*Chenopodium album*) (Other common names are Goosefoot, Pigweed, and Wild Spinach.) Its leaves in spring and summer are used. Its seed is used in the fall. Use the greens fresh, frozen, or canned; seeds are usually dried, roasted, and ground up for seasoning.



**PEPPER GRASS** (various species of the Lepidium genus) (Other common names are Field Pepper Grass, Field Cress, Cow Cress, Pepper Grass, and Poor Man's Pepper.) Its leaves are used as salad or as a pot green in spring. Its seedpods can be used either fresh or dried for a seasoning.



**POKEWEED** (*Phytolacca americana*) (Other common names are Poke Salad, Poke Salat, Pokeberry, Garget, Scoke, and

Pigeonberry.) Its small shoots in spring and tender stalks and leaves in spring and summer are used. It is always cooked and used fresh or frozen as a vegetable. It requires a parboiling process to remove phytolactic acid.



**PURSLANE** (*Portulaca oleracea*) (Other common names are Pussley, Pursley, and Pigweed.) Its stems and leaves are used from early spring through fall. It can be used fresh as a vegetable or in a salad, and the leaves can be pickled as a condiment.



**SPRING BEAUTY** (species of the Claytonia genus) (Other common names are Claytonia and Fairy Spuds) Its corms or tubers are used in spring and early summer. It is usually cooked as a vegetable.



**WATERCRESS** (*Nasturtium officinale*) Its leaves and stems are used all year long. It is used raw in salads or on sandwiches and can be used cooked as a vegetable component in soups.

