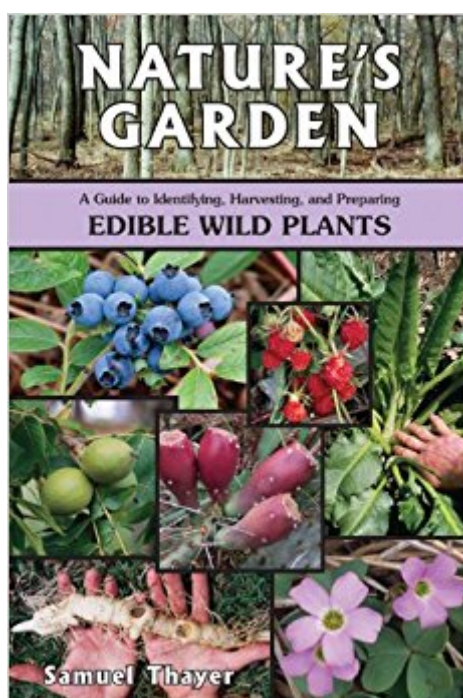


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# Nature's Garden: A Guide To Identifying, Harvesting, And Preparing Edible Wild Plants



## Synopsis

A detailed guide to 41 of the most widespread wild foods in North America, covering how to find and identify them, which parts are used, when and how to harvest them, and how to prepare them for the table. The cultural and natural history of the plants are also discussed. There is no overlap between the plants covered in this book and *The Forager's Harvest*.

## Book Information

Paperback: 512 pages

Publisher: Foragers Harvest Press; 1st Edition edition (March 1, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0976626616

ISBN-13: 978-0976626619

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1 x 9.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 342 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #26,206 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #40 in [Books > Reference >](#)

[Survival & Emergency Preparedness](#) #41 in [Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology >](#)

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## Customer Reviews

Samuel Thayer is an internationally recognized authority on edible wild plants who has authored two award-winning books on the topic, *Nature's Garden* and *The Forager's Harvest*. He has taught foraging and field identification for more than two decades. Besides lecturing and writing, Samuel is an advocate for sustainable food systems who owns a diverse organic orchard and harvests wild rice, acorns, hickory nuts, maple syrup, and other wild products. He lives in rural northern Wisconsin with his wife and three children.

These are not good times to put out a book on edible wild plants. Unless you're Samuel Thayer. When I reviewed Thayer's first book, *The Foragers Harvest*, I wrote that it is as good or better than anything available on the topic. It has since become the go-to book for students at the Jack Mountain Bushcraft School. His new book, *Nature's Garden*, builds upon the high standard set by *The Foragers Harvest* and establishes him as the leading authority and author on edible wild plants that has ever published. It isn't slightly better than other books on the topic; it's in a whole different league. The meat of the book is made up of plant accounts. These are in-depth profiles of

edible plants, full of photos of how to identify, harvest and use them. The author bases all of his work on personal experience, so there aren't the usual falsehoods handed down by authors of lesser works. Instead, you get what works, along with anecdotal stories of how the author got to know the individual plants and how he's used them in the past. His writing style is conversational, and while there is a description for each plant that includes botanical terminology, the author writes it so as to make it accessible to the non-botanist. The numerous photos contribute greatly to aid the neophyte in identifying the individual species. The Harvest And Preparation section for each plant is where the author's experience really shines. Whereas the Peterson's Field Guide To Edible Wild Plants will list "starchy root" or similar descriptive term after a plant, Thayer has several pages of highly descriptive how-to information. To use a specific example, most books on edible plants have a sentence or two on acorns. Nature's Garden has 50 pages. Anyone who has read The Foragers Harvest would expect the Plant Accounts to be encyclopedic and accessible, full of great photos and useful information. On this point, they deliver. If the book contained just Plant Accounts it would still be a fantastic resource. But there's more to outdoor living and foraging than how-to, and in the first section of the book the author gives a snapshot into the mind of living with wild foods. With sections on getting started, the ethics of harvesting wild plants, conservation, personal experiences on a wild food diet and a harvest calendar, he provides those new to foraging a great jumping off point. In a section titled Some Thoughts On Wild Food, he offers useful advice such as don't make a wild plant fit the description in the book (which is a common pitfall), then expounds upon the myth of the instant expert. The last chapter of the section is titled "Poison Plant Fables", where he discusses the story of Christopher McCandless and how his demise in Alaska, chronicled in the book and movie Into The Wild, didn't occur as the famous author of his biography would have us believe. He didn't poison himself by eating the wrong plant. Rather, he starved to death. By pointing out the facts, though, he doesn't poke fun at McCandless like so many armchair survivalists like to do. Instead, he treats him with respect, saving his derision for the authors and movie producers for not telling the truth. The money quote from this section comes in a section titled "What Lessons About Wilderness Survival And Wild Food Can Be Drawn From The Story Of Chris McCandless?" 'In a short term survival situation, food is of minor importance. However, in long term survival or "living off the land", it is of paramount importance.' Bushcraft continues to evolve for me away from skills and toward personal relationships with the land and people. While I've never met Samuel Thayer, after reading this first section I feel that we're kindred spirits. There isn't a better book on edible wild plants. Taken together with The Foragers Harvest, it is the last word on the topic in print. I don't think more can be learned from any book; to go beyond what Thayer has written, you have to be out

there actively foraging.

Engaging style and great photos. This is geared the most to plants of the northeast region, because Thayer wrote about what he knows. However, he includes a chart showing what percentage of these plants will grow in each North American region, and the plants included in the book are pretty wide-ranging. The photos show the plants at different seasons, and variations, so you get a good idea of what to look for. The most valuable takeaway I had is that actually living off the land requires much more effort than one would assume. For instance, he tells you how long it would take to harvest a gallon or so of the edible parts of a plant, which may be several hours. The preparation of a plant to eat also takes time. This means that it may not be possible for a novice to harvest enough wild food to live on. Anyone who says he'll "just go out to the woods and forage when the SHTF" is putting his family at risk. That one piece of information was a great motivator for me to really learn how to do this. This is a book about incorporating wild plants into one's everyday diet, which is a lot different from picking a casual nosh on a hike. Great book.

Beneficial foraging books  
The opening paragraphs are designed to assist others avoid some of the pit falls I made in purchasing wild food literature. You can skip this and go directly to the individual book reviews if you choose. Please note that this review is of multiple wild food books. I prefer authors that work with the plants they are writing about, and don't just repeat things they read from another book (yes some wild food authors actually do that). I also prefer books with good descriptions, lots of photos of each plant to make identification easier, and to cover the plant from identification to the plate. That's my bias, here is my review. I'm just a guy who likes to forage and enjoys the learning and nutritional aspect of wild foods. My main purpose for writing this review of multiple wild food books on one review is to assist others coming to wild foods for the first time (like I was three years ago), and to hopefully help them avoid some of the easily avoided pit falls I made in the literature I chose. At first I wanted books with the most plants in it for my money. It made sense to me at the time but ended up being a grave mistake. Books that devote one picture and a brief explanation to a plethora of plants helped me identify some plants in one stage of growth, but did next to nothing that would have allowed me to use them as food. Example, most books will show you one picture of the adult plant. Many times that's not when you want to harvest it. No one would eat a banana that was over ripe and pure black and call banana's in general inedible due to that experience. Yet many who have sampled a dandelion have done exactly that. As I've learned from John Kallas, one has to have the right part of the plant (this includes proper identification of the

plant), the plant has to be at the right stage of growth, and it has to be prepared properly. If you can't do those three things you shouldn't be sticking the plant in your mouth. Now on to the individual books.

**Wild Edible Plants By John Kallas:** 6 stars because it deserves more than 5. Instead of having hundreds of plants with one picture and one paragraph of information Kallas gives you less plants in far more detail and unmatched photography. If I could give this book to everyone in the United States I would as it is the best book I have found on the market. His descriptions of the plants are spot on and easy to read, his multiple full color pictures of each plant covered are the best I've seen in wild food literature, and he covers each plant from seedling to the dinner plate in stunning detail. If I could only own one book on wild edible foods this would be the one. No book can give you everything you need as a forager. That being said John does a superb job of plant selection in that most people in north america will be able to find all these plants within a mile of their home. For a guy taking care of two children under 3 years of age this book allowed me to forage while staying close to home. Consider this a must own. John also runs wild food adventures in Portland Oregon which offers wild food instruction in that area.

**Nature's Garden By Samuel Thayer:** 5.2 stars the second must own, and it too deserves more than 5 stars. If I could only own two wild food books this would be the second one on my shelf next to John Kallas book. The section on Oaks and acorns are worth the price of the book by it self let alone the numerous other plants in it. Mr. Thayer uses color photographs at various stages of growth just like Kallas does. After you own Kallas book you will be hooked and Nature's Garden is the next logical progression in your journey. Other reviewers have covered Sam's brilliant rebutal to Jon Krakauer's propagandist poison plant fable of how Chris McCandless died. Chris died of starvation not a poisonous plant. Sam actually has this section of the book posted on his website for viewing (go to foragersharvest dot com), and is worth reading even if you don't buy the book. I really benefited from Sam's sections on the different wild lettuces, elderberries, thistles, and many others. On top of that Sam has the most engaging writing style of all the wild food authors I've encountered. Not only are his pictures only second to those of Kallas, his descriptions are spot on, and reading his books are like reading one of your favorite novels.

**Foragers Harvest By Samuel Thayer** 5 stars. I prefer Thayer's Nature's Garden over this book for my area. That being said I can't really say anything bad about this book. Good descriptions, excellent pictures at various stages of growth, good selection of plants, and done with accuracy. This book was to my knowledge the first of it's kind back when it was released back in the mid 2000's. To my knowledge it was the best book on the market then, and has only been surpassed by his follow up book Nature's Garden and Kallas Wild Edible Plants. Being the first book in this motif it (unjustly I might add) received numerous attacks by a few disgruntled souls on s

book review section. One must remember Thayer was revolutionary in this field when he released this book, and people had a hard time adjusting. As my friend Stephen T. McCarthy once posted, "All truth passes through three stages: First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident. Well anyone who has used Sams books should understand the advantage of covering less plants in more detail than covering many plants with little to no detail like the over-hyped gimmick books that litter the wild food market do. I few things I really liked about this book include (but are not limited to): descriptions and photographs on cat tail, wapato, service berry, stinging and wood nettle. The canning section is solid for the beginning forager like I am. This in my opinion still fits the must own category. Euell Gibbons, *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* 4.5 stars Line drawings that are OK. Descriptions of the plants are excellent. Recipes are added by the author, plus his enthusiasm and good nature jump out at you through the page. I mostly use this book in conjunction with other books, and I never use it for it's photographs or line drawings. Not that their bad. Just not enough for a total novice in my opinion. Now his descriptions are excellent and should not be ignored. Nancy J. Turner, "Food Plants Of Coastal First Peoples" and "Food Plants of Interior First Peoples" I'll give it 5 stars for ethnobotany and 4 stars as a foraging book. If you live in the pacific northwest these books are MUST HAVES. A thorough grouping of the plants used by native americans for food in the pacific northwest. Why I only give it 4 stars is that it is essentially put in a field guide format which is very limiting when trying to use a plant for food. Plus while Turner is the queen of plants and uses in the pacific northwest, you'll only get a tenth of what she knows on any given plant. Kallas and Thayer go into much more detail, have numerous pictures, and lead their readers toward success. With Turner you'll get one good picture in one stage of growth. Through experience I've found that just isn't good enough. She does have more plants in her books than Kallas and Thayer but when you cover them in less detail that is to be expected. To be fair to Nancy I don't get the impression that these were designed specifically for foragers. All this being said I own them and wouldn't give them back if you paid me double what I paid for them. Linda Runyan, *The Essential Wild Food Survival Guide* 3.8 stars, a good book. Well first I do have some issues with this book: I'm not fond of the line drawings or black and white photos, she does edibility tests on wild foods and discovered many of them that way (which I'm not a fan of), and some of her descriptions are lacking in my opinion. All that being said she cans her wild foods, dries them for winter use, and lives off of wild edibles all year long successfully. She shares a lot of this knowledge with the reader in this book, and being a nurse myself I'm also able to relate to her thinking in a lot of ways. Plus her stories of using cat tail fluff as stuffing for a couch only to find out that it was infested with insect eggs was hilarious. She tells you all the mistakes she made so you don't have to repeat them. She

will tell you to use two other good field guides along with hers. I would plan on not using hers at all for the pictures. I have issues with her lack of oversight on the pictures. I'm sure some will disagree but when Linda tells you in her video (by the same name) that her chickweed picture isn't very good it does bring to mind credibility questions. *Edible Wild Plants a North American Field Guide*, by Elias and Dykemann. 3.5 stars At one point in my very early stages I thought this book was the bomb. However, I would identify a plant, find it at times accidentally for the most part, and go "now what?" And that is the weakness of the field guide format in wild food literature (Thayer and Kallas do so much more for you). This book is almost the opposite of Linda Runyans in some ways. She doesn't give you good pictures but gives you some good details on what to do with the plant after you find it. This book gives you some good pictures, a brief description, and then says "your on your own kid." In Samuel Thayers "Foragers Harvest" he gives great descriptions between wood nettle and stinging nettle (both are edible when properly prepared). Thayer also happened to point out that this book actually has a picture of wood nettle and call it stinging nettle. I checked up on this, and lo and behold he was right. They have two pictures and one is wood nettle and one is stinging nettle. They are both listed as stinging nettle in the book. This tells me that the authors might not know all the plants as well as they should. Don't get me wrong I still like the book. But it does prove that wild food authors don't always use or know the plants their writing about. Honorable mention goes to "Abundantly Wild" By Teresa Marrone. It is a wild food cook book. The pictures in the book are not great (though oddly beat many of the photos in supposed field guides) but I have read a few of the recipes and they look promising. I'll write a review about a year from now once I've put the book to the test. Until then I'll let you read the reviews on this book and make up your own mind.

This is my second first choice to pack. If I have a partner they would have to pack one two books ...EDIBLE WILD PLANTS by Dr Kallas and this book NATURE'S GARDEN by Samuel Thayer . Natures Garden is a whole nother view on a whole buncha more plants and nuts and wild berry's...Better put this one in the pack ...but I'm tellin ya both these books together is creapin up on a extra 10 lbs !! But worth every ounce !!! Once you see these two books , you will not want to leave either one behind. Perfect for a pack dog !!! Here fy doh !!!!! LOL

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