

Guidance for safe foraging

Foraging is searching for and collecting edible plants, seaweed, fruits, nuts, seeds and fungi from the outdoors. This year-round activity can be a great way to spend time in nature. However, you need to take care to make sure that foods are gathered sustainably and are safe to eat.

Before starting to forage, it is important to know that some plants growing wild are poisonous, and some are even deadly.

Safe foraging tips

Here are our essential safety guidelines for foraging wild food to protect your health and the environment:

- always be certain of the identity of the plants you are foraging, as some are poisonous
- wash your harvest well, regardless of where it was collected
- make sure that the food isn't growing on anything which could be harmful e.g. Yew trees
- if you plan to eat foraged food in a warm dish (e.g. soup) cooking until steaming hot will reduce the risk of foodborne pathogens that may be present
- don't allow children to pick or eat wild food unsupervised
- don't collect any plant or fruit that looks damaged (e.g. if it appears bruised or mouldy)
- avoid collecting plants and berries growing on old industrial sites, busy roadside verges or where the ground is visibly contaminated with oil or ash
- avoid collecting plants that are near developed land or busy roadsides where pesticides may have been applied
- avoid collecting from plants which are low to the ground which may have been contaminated by animals or from the ground
- if it's your first time trying a foraged food, only consume a small amount initially to ensure you don't have an adverse reaction
- keep a piece of the foraged food aside so it can later be identified should you eat it and become unwell
- remember, if you go foraging, only take what you need so that there is enough of the plant left to reproduce

Under the [Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#) and [the Wildlife \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1985](#) it is illegal to uproot any wild plant without the permission of the owner or occupier of the land. It is also illegal to pick, uproot, collect the seed from, or sell, any of particularly rare or vulnerable species.

Safe foraging

Various wild foods can be gathered across the seasons. Different parts of the same plants can be used for a variety of purposes, which will make the most of what the hedgerows have to offer. For example, elderberries are available from late summer into autumn and are popular for making jams and syrups, while elderflowers can be used for making cordial in spring. Blackberries and chestnuts are available into the late autumn and early winter. Dandelion and burdock, which can be foraged from spring to autumn, have leaves which can be used in salads, and roots which can be added to soups.

Foraging for wild mushrooms

Wild mushrooms are also plentiful in autumn. However, they are easy to misidentify, and some are very poisonous. If you are picking mushrooms from the wild, it's important to make sure you know exactly what type you are gathering.

It is important to remember that the growth source of the item being foraged may also be dangerous, e.g. the type of tree a mushroom might be growing on. Never forage or eat wild mushrooms if you are not certain of their identification. Hemlock, and hemlock water dropwort which grows near waterways, are in the carrot family and can easily be mistaken for wild celery or wild parsnip. However, both are poisonous and potentially lethal.

Always make sure you know exactly what it is that you are picking. If you have any doubt, leave it where it is. It's a good idea to use a guidebook on any foraging excursions or go with an experienced guide to help you identify what is edible versus what could be harmful.

Join a foraging group

There are many guided foraging walks and foraging groups available to join across the UK. These groups are usually led by foraging experts who can help give you tips on how to identify and safely consume wild foods you have gathered.

Even though many plants and herbs are commonly foraged, that doesn't mean they are safe for everyone.

There are some plants which are not advised to eat during pregnancy, or if you have certain underlying health conditions. To be on the safe side, consult with a health care professional before eating any foraged foods.

Not all parts of a plant may be edible

It is also important to remember that just because one part of a plant is edible, it doesn't mean that all parts are. Some plants may need to be cooked to destroy toxins. For example, elderberries require cooking to destroy toxins present in the raw berries before they are safe to eat; the leaves, barks or roots of the elder plant should never be eaten.

Foraging for seaweed

When foraging for seaweed we advise you to take care to make sure that foods are safe to eat and gathered sustainably. Local and National Heritage sites can provide relevant information dependant on geographical location. Much of the coastline is owned by The Crown Estate and [allows for personal foraging in most areas, but some areas do have restrictions or require permits.](#)

If you forage food during or after a flood we advise that [you should not eat any food that has been touched by floodwater or sewage.](#)

Protect people who are vulnerable to illness

If you or someone you know is at an increased risk of [food poisoning](#), this can include young children, older people and people with an underlying health condition, we advise you take extra care when foraging. For vulnerable people, extra caution should be taken to ensure food safety:

- correctly identify fruits and plants you are foraging
- wash foraged foods thoroughly before eating

- [cook foraged food thoroughly](#) to avoid food poisoning
- never forage mouldy fruit or plants

Seek advice from foraging experts if you are unsure about foraging practices and how this can affect vulnerable consumers.