

Guidance for safe foraging

Foraging is searching for and collecting edible plants, 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

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.

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.

Never eat wild mushrooms if you are not completely 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.

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.

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.

Safe foraging tips

- 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
- 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.