

Week of Wild Food - Day Seven

Contributed by Becky Lerner
31 May 2009

Shifting patterns

This was the first time I've ever lived on wild food alone, but it surely won't be the last.

I'm grateful for the insight I have gained from this week's adventure. I've shared my thoughts on sustainability over the past few days. Today I would like to reflect on what I have learned about survival.

EAT LIKE THE FIRST PEOPLE: I made the mistake of assuming that the only difference between my conventional diet and a wild one here in the Pacific Northwest would be the foods themselves -- for instance, chickweed instead of lettuce and nettles in place of spinach -- but in fact the structure and proportions are totally different. I am accustomed to eating an almost entirely vegetarian diet with lots of vegetable protein, fruits and starchy carbohydrates like yams and oatmeal. In contrast, the indigenous diet here was heavily weighted toward meat and only lightly supplemented with greens. The calories all came from fish, aquatic animals and deer, with vitamins and minerals from the inner parts of tree bark, seaweed, the shoots of some plants and only occasionally some roots -- and according to Nancy J. Turner, author of "Food Plants of Coastal First People," meals made of roots alone probably only graced their plates for maybe 12 days per year. No wonder I was so very hungry!

The land in each region offers a limited selection. Survival means you've got to conform to what it gives you. Next time around, I will need to focus on animal protein. I must fish at the very least.

If you are interested in eating wild, it's a good idea to study not only what foods the native people ate in your region, but also in what proportions. You may have to readjust.

FIND YOUR TRIBE: It's very empowering to embark on a survival challenge solo because you learn that you can rely on yourself. But this is not nearly as efficient as having help. If you have four people in your "tribe," you can accomplish four times as much as one person in the same amount of time. For instance, I could spend six hours gathering burdock roots, and simultaneously, one friend could be fishing, another could be picking berries, and one more could find some greens. At the end of one day, we could have several days' worth of hearty meals.

SCOUT THE AREA: Gathering was surprisingly tedious, but I spent even more time searching for food sources. From now on, I am going to start mapping out plants in my neighborhood, taking photos and noting how long each item is available, so that in following years I'll already know what I've got to work with in any given week. I'm also going to pay attention to patterns that can help me find foods in unfamiliar areas. For instance, I've observed that wild carrot, poison hemlock and thistle seem to grow near one another, that pineapple weed likes the center of sunny footpaths, and that wild ginger prefers very shady places like forests. These clues could save me valuable time.

STORE THE GOODIES: I'm going to dry and store plants that offer a lot of flavor or nutrition, such as stinging nettles, so that I have them available later on in the year when they are no longer growing. When berries and acorns come around, I'm going to horde them. It's no fun being dependent on the whims of the wild when you're stuck in a seasonal cusp!

One of the most inspiring things I heard all week came from my close friend the mid-western herbalist Gregory Monzel, who told me that every plant on Earth has a gift for humans. "Even poison hemlock is homeopathic in extremely small doses," he said. The world is filled with ancient secrets waiting to be acknowledged. What might be growing in your backyard?

RESOURCES: You can find some great plant books and information about wilderness skills schools in the first article I wrote for Culture Change. You can find some information on herbalist schools in the United States and Canada here. A few of the readers who e-mailed me this week kindly shared their own recommendations, including the Arctos School of Herbal and Botanical Medicine in Portland, Oregon, and the Anima Center in New Mexico.

I am fascinated by wild plants and will continue to learn about them, taste them photograph them and blog about them at First Ways. I hope you'll join me. As always, I love to hear from readers. You can e-mail me at RebeccaELerner@gmail.com.

By the way, I had intended to do some coastal foraging today, but unfortunately my expert friend canceled at the last minute. I'll cover coastal foraging at First Ways as soon as I find someone to show me the ropes.

* * * * *