Weeds I Grow and Love to Eat

By Martha Tillman
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Weeds! This word causes a negative emotion from every gardener, especially late summer when it has become obvious that once again the weeds win. However there are some good weeds which will give you the easiest, cheapest food you’ll ever grow.

My description of good weeds are that they usually self sow, need no care or attention other than eating them or easily removing them so that they don’t crowd out your cultivated crops. There are two categories of desirable weeds, totally wild weeds and those that have been planted and gone wild.

Wild weeds:

Lamb’s quarters is somewhat like spinach, but I think it’s even better. I pull up the entire plant when they are around eight inches and cook the stems and leaves. When it is somewhat larger I use only the leaves. I leave a few plants to self sow and the ones I don’t eat go into the compost. You can buy seeds for Magentasreen Lambs Quarters, which has reddish coloring to the new leaves.

Garden cress grows in dark green rosettes close to the ground in the winter and shows up in cultivated soil. They should be used in the winter before they have any flower growth or they can be bitter. What a treat to eat something green and tasty out of the garden when everything is so bleak and dead. I clean and cook the rosette whole.

Ground cherries are marble sized seedy sweet fruit with a unique flavor. They grow wrapped up in a brown paper-like cover. These self-sow vigorously and I pull up most of them but always leave some. I remember my Dad guiding us through his big corn field to show us huge ground cherry plants that he and his hoe had intentionally spared. Sitting in the shade of the corn with the insects buzzing above and munching on these sweet treats is a fond memory of summers long past. They are good for a refreshing break from the garden, but not much else. I’ll always grow some in my garden. Seeds for a few named varieties are available from some seed companies.

Plants gone wild:

Amaranthas are stunningly beautiful and also good to eat. They can grow 6 to 7 feet tall or more and some have burgundy leaves and massive burgundy flower (seed) heads. The leaves are cooked the same way and are similar to Lambs Quarters. The seeds are also edible. I planted a package of mixed varieties ten years ago and they have been growing in my garden since.

Jerusalem artichokes make tasty tubers that are dug in the winter. They should be given their own well dug area away from the main garden. Once planted, they will come back every year. They make a 6- to 8-foot tall plant with pretty yellow flowers. They can be used raw in salads or cooked like a potato.
Banquet dill is one type that will self-sow. I love dill in salads. When the plants go to seed, I throw the seeds all over my garden. If a plant comes up where I can’t leave it I'll transplant it to a better place.

Delicious food and very little work and delicious food: What more can you ask for?

Of course, you want to be sure that you properly identify these plants before you eat them. The Virginia Cooperative Extension website is a good resource: http://www.ppws.vt.edu/weedindex.htm.

Gardening Tasks for April

- Set out perennials and summer flowering bulbs. Prepare beds with superphosphate and leaf compost.
- Divide and transplant perennials
- Fertilize trees, shrubs, ground covers and rose bushes
- Check for azalea lace bugs boxwood leafminer and euonymus scale. Spray if needed.
- Start weekly fungicide spray on roses now until frost to prevent black spot
- Dogwood spot anthracnose begins to appear now. A pre- and post-fungicide spray (Daconil) is recommended. Keep tree well watered and fertilized.

Do you have a question for the Transylvania Extension Master Gardeners or a subject you’d like to see addressed in this column? E-mail us at manymoons@citcom.net or have your garden questions answered at our telephone clinic from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Wednesdays, March through October. Call 884-3239 or walk-in during those hours at the Community Services Building, 98 E. Morgan St. The Transylvania Extension Master Gardener program is sponsored by the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service: www.transylvania.ces.ncsu.edu.