

Backyard 'super veggies'

“Eat your veggies! They’re good for you!” We probably cannot count the number of times we heard those words from our parents during our childhood or even shared this advice to our children at the dinner table. We most certainly were reassured about the remarkable health benefits of eating vegetables from physicians, dieticians, nutritionists and various health publications. Did you ever wonder which vegetable provides the most nutrition and health benefits? Traditional vegetables such as broccoli, carrots, green beans, red beets come to mind and rightfully so, as they are packed with important vitamins and minerals. Furthermore, recent studies have found Swiss chard, kale and purple cabbage to be the most nutritional edibles of the vegetable world. However, there’s a “super veggie” that trumps all other veggies in its nutritional value, and it’s not a recently discovered wonder from some tropical rainforest or high-elevation mountain peak in Asia, but one that can be found right in your backyard. In fact, this pesky and persistent palatable is considered an invasive weed throughout its range in the United States. Unfortunately, it is here to stay, but hopefully for a brief moment of time, that is- from the backyard to our bellies. “Eat the weeds,” wild edible plant enthusiasts often say, especially if it is the plant called Garlic Mustard.

Belligerent biennial

Columbia University explains that garlic mustard *Alliaria petiolate* grows to be 2 - 3 feet tall. It has many white flowers of 4 petals on the end of 1 - 2 flowering stems. The leaves of the herb are alternate, triangular shaped, coarsely toothed, and 2 - 3 inches across. The fruits are black, cylindrical, and grooved. They ripen between mid-June and late September. Garlic mustard has a two-year life cycle. It spends its first year as a green rosette 2 - 4 inches off the ground. It remains green through the winter. The second-year garlic mustard will start to flower. Once dead, garlic mustard can be identified by erect stalks of dry, pale, brown seed pods that remain, and may hold a viable seed throughout the summer.

The herb has an autogamous breeding system which produces 15,000 seeds annually, allowing for a small number of individuals to create large populations.

These seeds remain viable for up to 5 years. After a dormant season, garlic mustard has a rapid growth period in the late fall to early spring, when most native plants are dormant. This allows the plant to dominate nutrients, space and light when other plants cannot get it.

Wonder weed

The aggressive growth behavior of garlic mustard, high seed production and allelopathic toxins in its roots, which functions as a herbicide that inhibits growth of other plants is why garlic mustard is considered a non-native invasive weed. Given time, garlic mustard will eventually dominate roadsides, ditches, gardens and most importantly, streamside corridors and forest understories. Any pristine area with a predominance of native wildflower species can become threatened and encroached upon. Furthermore, garlic mustard does not wither by late fall and early winter like most perennial plants. Since it is a biennial, next year's leaves of garlic mustard can be found as lush green rosettes, while the remaining landscape is barren. As mentioned earlier, garlic mustard already has a head start on our native plants; so unless it is controlled and managed, garlic mustard is here to stay.

Tops the charts

Fortunately, this pesky and persistent weed is quite nutritious, and makes fine table fare. John Kalas, PhD writes in The Wild Food Adventure Series, "Garlic mustard is one of the most nutritious leafy greens ever analyzed. In fact, of all the leafy greens in my nutrient charts, garlic finds itself at the top of the list for about a third of all nutrients listed. There are no greens higher in fiber, beta-carotene, vitamin C, vitamin E, and zinc."

According to research conducted by the Institute for the Study of Edible Wild Plants and Other Foragables, one cup of fresh garlic mustard leaves (about 100 grams) has more of, or equal to, the listed nutritional values of our common domesticated greens, such as spinach, Swiss chard, collard greens, broccoli, turnips, and leaf lettuce. Garlic mustard is highest amongst all leafy green vegetables in Fiber; Vitamin A; B-Carotene; Vitamin E; Vitamin C; Calcium; Iron; Zinc; and Manganese. Garlic mustard also scores very high in Omega-3 Fatty Acids and Copper.

From ditches to dinner

Personally, I find that the nutritional value of garlic mustard is quite amazing. It is like a hidden multi-vitamin disguised as a green scallop-shaped leaf. And guess what? Garlic mustard is abundant and free for the pickings. Gather garlic mustard when the basal rosettes are lush and green before the plant develops a long stem and flower stock. What I simply do is yank the rosette of leaves including the tap root out from the soil, and using a pair of scissors clip the leaves from the plant. The cluster of edible leaves goes in one bag while the roots in another; which will be contained and discarded in the trash. If you toss the clipped roots on the forest floor, odds are the plant will re-root and grow. If you elect to manage a few garlic mustard plants in your backyard, just cut the leaf clusters as needed, but try not to allow the plant to produce a flowering stem.

As with any other wild edible plant make certain that your identification is positive. Remember to collect in areas of clean environments that are not polluted or have been sprayed with herbicides or other chemicals. Garlic mustard leaves have a distinctive “garlic odor” when torn or ripped, so the sniff test is a very effective way to identify this plant. Thoroughly wash your gatherings in clean water. I have read that some folks soak garlic mustard leaves as well as other wild edibles in cool water with hydrogen peroxide added (around one tablespoon per quart) to remove any pollutants, parasites, or other impurities. For optimum freshness, garlic mustard leaves can be submerged in water and stored in the refrigerator for two to three days. Before eating, rinse again and separate the leaves from stems, fibers and roots.

Creative concoctions

To summarize about this remarkable wild vegetable, I recently walked right into a river basin full of fresh garlic mustard rosettes. Within a matter of minutes I collected several large heaping handfuls of fresh garlic mustard leaves that were easily placed inside a plastic bag. When I returned home, I thoroughly washed and rinsed my succulent harvest and then placed in a colander to drip dry. The soft stems were pinched and discarded from the scalloped-shaped leaves. The succulent green leaves were then placed into a large container and kept in the refrigerator until my fiancée Wendy came home from work. We then made individual salads. Wendy preferred her garlic mustard leaves mixed with lettuce and other salad vegetables, while I like just a bowl full of garlic mustard greens with blue cheese

dressing. Garlic mustard has a slight pungent flavor with hint of garlic taste and odor, so be creative to your taste preferences. The next morning try adding a small handful of garlic mustard leaves to an egg and cheese omelet. Even when away from home during your lunchtime at work, collect some fresh garlic mustard leaves which can be found growing in a safe and clean area. Wash and rinse some garlic mustard leaves and layer them in a sandwich or wrap, or toss a few leaves into your salad for added flavor. And if you want to try something really unique, try a peanut butter and garlic mustard sandwich. Your taste buds will be pleasantly surprised.

Garlic Mustard is the unknown backyard “super veggie” that is not only delicious and nutritious, but abundantly free for the pickings. In addition, the added benefit of pinching a handful of healthfulness into your diet is that you will also be pinching a helping hand to the environment.

Recommended reading:

A Field Guide to Edible Wild Plants: Eastern and Central North America by Lee Allen Peterson and Roger Tory Peterson