

By [Hannah Frances Johansson](#)

As many across the Bay Area look for alternatives to supermarkets in the age of COVID-19, also known as the coronavirus, foragers urge shoppers to search no further than backyard weeds and tufts of wild plants on their street corners. As they see it, free food is everywhere.

On a wild food tour of the UC Berkeley campus, co-founder and director of [Berkeley Open Source Food](#) Philip Stark stooped to pluck a pad of nasturtium from a slope just outside the Hearst Mining Circle.

“Peppery and sweet,” he said as he chewed the broad leaf of the orange-flowered weed. “The flowers are very commonly used in salads. I think the pads are tastier than the flowers, but the tastiest part of all is the stem of the flower.”

In the half-hour tour from Hearst Mining Circle to North Gate to Memorial Glade, Stark pointed out more than 15 different species of edible weeds along with recommendations for salad, wrap, stir-fry and pickling recipes. Candied redwood shoots, pickled magnolia petals and strawberry manzanita jam were just some of the delicacies Stark described.

But the walk around campus was not just a tour of ingredients for gourmet luxuries; it was a tour of sustenance. While pointing out edible weeds, Stark explained the lack of nutritional variety in the American supermarket produce aisle in comparison to that of wild herbaceous species. Phytonutrients and fiber have exited en masse from our produce as humans artificially select for more palatable plants.

Aside from the nutritional variety of foraged plants, Stark also emphasized their sheer abundance. In an email, he estimated almost all his leafy greens and most of his in-season fruits are foraged.

“Other people see weeds or green, and I see food waste,” Stark said.

A bonus: Most common edible weeds around campus are non-native invasive species, meaning they originated elsewhere and were brought to California, where they took over the landscape. So uprooting a patch of dandelions to decorate a salad might just be doing nearby native species a [favor](#).

Many of these species can also be found across the world, so if you can identify enough edible species in the Bay Area, you are likely to find something to eat anywhere except the “tundra or desert,” as Stark put it.

This abundance of invasive plants has contributed to a deficit of food for Native Americans across California looking to forage for native species, however. When invasive plants were first

introduced to California by Spanish colonization, they took over ecosystems that Native Americans had been hunting in, gathering from and tending to for centuries.

“It’s really ecological scorched earth,” said Thomas Carlson, UC Berkeley professor of ethnobotany, in reference to the California landscape.

Invasive species tend to outcompete native plants for resources such as water, space and sunlight. They are also generally avoided by herbivores, which puts more pressure on the remaining native species. Invasives have the power to turn over entire landscapes, the same landscapes Native Americans rely on for food.

Of course, invasive species aren’t the sole contributors to the lack of Native American food sovereignty, or ability to control their own food system. With colonization came drastic changes to California land and water through mining, hydroelectric dams, agriculture, logging and fire suppression. Native Americans were forced from their land and subjected to cultural assimilation policies along with government-sanctioned genocide. This disrupted the communication of the knowledge needed to preserve the Native American way of eating.

Today, access to Native American foods is still associated with higher rates of food security among tribal members. According to a study done by UC Berkeley Cooperative Extension Specialist Jennifer Sowerwine with Lisa Hillman of the Karuk Tribe, however, 99% of native peoples in the Klamath River Basin of California reported they want more access to Native American foods. This lack of access to native foods is in part attributed to the lack of native species available for foraging.

To avoid further disruption of native plant habitats, professional forager Bryan Jessop offered a rule of thumb for native species: Be sure that the plant is abundant, and only take 10% of any patch you find.

Jessop is the owner of Morchella Wild Foods, a company that delivers foraged food to the plethora of restaurants in San Francisco in want of wild produce, including Lazy Bear, Californios and Flour + Water. In the midst of mass restaurant shutdowns due to current shelter-in-place policies, he is setting up a delivery service for wild and foraged foods.

Berkeley also has a history of foraged foods in restaurants, including Chez Panisse, the restaurant in North Berkeley that catapulted the slow food movement with its opening in 1971.

More recently, Cafe Ohlone, a semipermanent restaurant on Bancroft Way, has opened its doors to serve foods of Ohlone tribes eaten before contact with Europeans. Founders Vincent Medina and Louis Trevino gather fruits, spices, nuts, herbs and teas for the café’s menu.

Its menu is beautiful: “venison meatballs with crushed yerba buena” served with huckleberries, local mushrooms and a laurel-infused blackberry dipping sauce; and duck breast served with wild strawberries and blackberries.

But while professional foraging and wild cooking might take years of experience to master, Jessop advised beginners to learn one species at a time.

Some easily recognizable edible plants are mallow, miner's lettuce, wild radish and wild mustard. All are delicious and good for beginners. A quick Google search or scan of iNaturalist, a plant mapping app, will help identify these.

“You don't eat something unless you're 100% sure of what you've got because there are deadly mushrooms, deadly plants,” Jessop said.

What are these deadly plants? Well, Jessop recommends learning to recognize poison hemlock and poison oak right away. These are both dangerous and often mixed in with other edible species.

On the tour of campus with Stark, he addressed a different kind of toxin to look out for: petrochemicals from asphalt. Stark discussed the importance of checking surroundings for asphalt before diving head-first into a patch of edible weeds.

You should also watch out for signs of herbicides. UC Berkeley uses chemicals in landscaping, but the organization Herbicide Free Campus is working to change that.

“Obviously, we don't want to be promoting foraging around campus if they spray the campus because we don't know what has been sprayed with toxic chemicals,” said Mackenzie Feldman, founder and executive director of [Herbicide Free Campus](#).

Feldman, a recent UC Berkeley alumna, started Herbicide Free Cal with senior Bridget Gustafson during her time at UC Berkeley to work with groundskeepers to stop the use of pesticides and herbicides on campus.

Now called Herbicide Free Campus, the organization is present on 14 different campuses across the country.

Herbicide Free Campus is learning that in order to eradicate the use of pesticides on campus, it needs to educate campus communities about how to appreciate weeds.

“These weeds, no matter how much we try to suppress them in farming and urban landscapes ... will exist, so figuring out ways to use them and incorporate them into our diets and into our market system is really important,” said Aliza McHugh, director of partnerships for Herbicide Free Campus.

Whether the goal is to preserve native species, eliminate food waste or put an end to herbicide use, there is one common message among those involved with the foraging community: learn to love weeds.