

Native Plants for Edible Landscaping



Many native species have been used in some way as food in the past. I have tried to limit this list to the more practical examples of foods you might be able to harvest in reasonable numbers on a residential property. These include species which are prolific enough to withstand some regular harvesting or those for whom only portions of the plants such as fruits or leaves will be harvested.

This list is only intended to guide you in some things you might plant around your home, **never collect native plants in the wild**. Most native plants are threatened by habitat loss and degradation so they cannot withstand the additional pressure of harvesting. Furthermore, this is illegal on any public property. Fruit and nut collection must even be limited to a few individual samples only (one possible exception to this would be raspberries and blackberries which are quite abundant).

I have also include a list of edible weeds which are likely to sprout up in urban areas and disturbed rural sites. Feel free to eat as many of these as you can gather! But, please do not cultivate these plants as they are troublesome weeds.

Here are several books you can use to find out more information:

Edible Wild Plants of the Prairie by Kelly Kindscher
Medicinal Wild Plants of the Prairie by Kelly Kindscher
Field Guide to Edible Wild Plants by Bradford Angier
Edible and Medicinal Wild Plants of Minnesota and Wisconsin by Matthew Alfs
The Forager's Harvest by Samuel Thayer
Wild Berries and Fruits Field Guide for Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan by Teresa Marrone

Trees:

black walnut (*Juglans nigra*): The nuts are edible, fruit casing can be used as a black dye.

oak (*Quercus* spp.): Acorns from various oak species are edible and were once a staple in the diet of many Native Americans. White oaks have less tannins in the acorns than the red oaks and can be eaten raw while those from red oaks must be boiled repeatedly to remove the bitter tannins. Acorns can be ground into a flour and used to replace corn meal or white flour in a recipe.

hickory (*Carya* spp.): Shagbark hickory (*Carya ovata*) is the most common species and produces sweet nuts that can be harvested when they drop from the tree after a hard frost and can be eaten raw.

Pecan (*Carya illinoensis*): Native as far north as northern Illinois and throughout the South, with global warming it will do well in more northern locations, to central WI. The nuts need no introduction.

American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*): Once dominated the eastern deciduous forests but was crippled by chestnut blight, which was introduced along with the Chinese chestnut in the early 1900's. They can be grown in the midwest, out of the range of the fungal pathogen, and produce delicious nuts.

basswood or linden (*Tilia americana*): Fruit is pea-shaped nut attached to a long leafy bract that ripen in October but often remain through winter.

hawthorn (*Crataegus* spp.): The fruits of these rose family members are edible fresh or preserved as jam or dried.

Iowa crab (*Malus ioensis*): These native apples are small, bitter and hard. Though edible raw, they are tastier cooked in a dish (with a little sugar added) such as preserves or pie.

red mulberry (*Morus rubra*): This is a different species from the common white mulberry (*Morus alba*) which is a weedy Asian import. Both produce a delicious berry which should only be eaten in small quantities since they can act as a laxative when too many are eaten.

Shrubs:

serviceberry (*Amalanchier* spp.): Our native serviceberries, also known as Juneberries are exceptional landscaping plants with showy spring flowers and bright fall colors. The berries ripen in June and taste like blueberries. They are relished by people and birds alike.

black chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*) Another beautiful shrub with white spring flowers and bright fall colors. It may be too tart to be eaten raw, but the nutritious fruit can be cooked, sweetened and used in pies or preserves. Harvest after a frost for the best flavor.

hazelnut (*Corylus americana*): Edible nuts and colorful fall foliage make this a wonderful shrub. Tends to be colony forming, so its also excellent for borders and visual barriers.

PawPaw (*Asimina triloba*): These large, 'tropical', fruits have a creamy texture and a flavor likened to banana, mango or cantaloupe. Native as far north as northern Illinois and throughout the South, with global warming it will do well in more northern locations, to central WI.

American plum (*Prunus americana*): This colony forming shrub has tasty fruits which are quickly consumed by birds.

chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*): The dried fruits of this species are edible and various parts of the plant were used by Native Americans to flavor meat.

smooth and **staghorn sumac** (*Rhus glabra* and *R. typhina*)- These colony forming native shrubs have beautiful red fall foliage and the fruit can be made into a drink similar to lemonade. They can, however, be aggressive if not carefully managed.

black currants (*Ribes americana*): edible berries, can be used in jam.

Missouri gooseberry (*Ribes missouriense*): edible berries, can be used in jam. Thorny and low-growing, potential for use as a hedge.

Red Raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*): the wild type plants have similar flavor to the many commercial cultivars of this species, but the fruit are slightly smaller and less prolific.

Black Raspberry (*Rubus occidentalis*): The fruits of this species are large, dark, juicy and sweeter than red raspberry. Among our best wild fruit.

Blackberry (*Rubus allegheniensis*): This is among the largest of our *Rubus* species, and so it can seem unruly in the home landscape. Thorns are formidable too. But the delicious fruit ripen a bit later than raspberries, and are famously good in pie and other deserts.

pasture rose (*Rosa carolina*), **early wild rose** (*R. blanda*) and **prairie rose** (*R. arkansana*): Rose hips are edible raw, cooked or made into jelly. Fresh greens are also edible.

elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*): The berries are commonly made into jam or baked into pies and can otherwise be used as you would any small berry.

New Jersey tea (*Ceanothus americanus*): the dried leaves of this prairie shrub make for a black tea substitute. This is a fine, small ornamental shrub.

Leadplant (*Amorpha canescens*): Like New Jersey tea, the leaves of this species can be made into a tea.

wild grape (*Vitis riparia*): These wild relatives of domestic grapes are smaller and slightly more bitter than the domestic variety. They are gathered by wildlife quickly, so people rarely have a chance to sample them.

Wildflowers:

wild onion (*Allium canadense*) **wild leeks** (*Allium tricoccum*) & **nodding wild onion** (*A. cernuum*): Entire plant is edible just like leeks and scallions.

lead plant (*Amorpha canescens*): Leaves of this attractive dry-mesic prairie plant can be made into a tea.

hog peanut (*Amphicarpaea bracteata*): This rambling vine has seeds both above ground and below ground which are edible when cooked.

ground nut (*Apios americana*) - This species prefers moist areas and has unique maroon flowers. Underground tubers are edible. A related species is a common component of many African dishes.

wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) - Can be used as a substitute for domestic ginger, but have a slightly less strong flavor.

common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*): Many parts of this plant may be edible, but only after being cooked to break down the toxic milky sap that gives this plant its name.

spring beauty (*Claytonia virginica*): The entire plant is edible but the root (corm) is usually what is sought for consumption. It will take several years to establish a colony large enough for harvesting, likely more a novelty food than anything else.

toothwort (*Dentaria laciniata*): The roots are edible raw, preferably salted and apparently good in sandwiches. It will take several years to establish a colony large enough for harvesting, likely more a novelty food than anything else.

white trout lily (*Erythronium albidum*): The bulbs are edible raw or cooked, and the leaves are edible if cooked. It will take several years to establish a colony large enough for harvesting, however, once established, the colonies can be harvested seasonally.

wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*): The fruits are quite tasty though smaller than domestic strawberries. It will take several years to establish a colony large enough for harvesting, likely more a novelty food than anything else. **woodland strawberry** (*Fragaria vesca*) are slightly smaller and a good choice for a lightly shaded site.

annual sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*): The seeds of this weedy native species are edible, in fact cultivated sunflowers are horticultural varieties of this species.

Jerusalem-artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*): The edible root tubers of this species taste like potatoes or artichoke and are becoming popular among permaculturalists for their high productivity, ease of cultivation and attractiveness.

wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*): The leaves of the common prairie plant are used to make earl grey tea.

may apple (*Podophyllum peltatum*): The fruit of may apples is edible in late summer when soft, and has a taste somewhat like kiwi fruit.

low-bush and velvet-leaf blueberry (*Vaccinium angustifolium* & *V. myrtilloides*) These wild blueberries are every bit as delicious (though a tad smaller) than any blueberry you would find in the store. They require acidic soil, though a well-watered mix of compost and sand might do.

ostrich fern fiddleheads (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*) Young tender fiddleheads taste best when steamed, can be used in salads, be careful not to confuse with other ferns that can contain carcinogens.

Edible Weeds:

There are many species of non-native weeds which are edible to humans. Some of these were brought to the new world on purpose as a food crop, others were accidental. Do not cultivate these species, some of them are among our worst noxious weeds!

garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*) - This is one of our most problematic invasive species. Young leaves are edible but somewhat bitter becoming very bitter with age. Use as you would watercress.

common burdock (*Arctium minus*) - Roots and young leaves are edible when cooked properly. The roots are best when collected in the fall from young plants.

yellow rocket aka **wintercress** (*Barbarea vulgaris*): The leaves can be eaten raw when tender or boiled when older. They are best collected before the plant flowers or late in fall before the plant goes dormant for the winter. Flower buds can be eaten as well and when lightly cooked are similar to broccoli.

creeping bellflower (*Campanula rapunculoides*): this ornamental garden plant has become invasive and is very difficult to kill. The roots are edible raw or cooked and are slightly sweet. Try them fried and sweetened with sugar. Fresh flowers are edible too and can add color to a salad.

shepherd's purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*): Young leaves are edible raw, while older leaves must be boiled.

lamb's quarters (*Chenopodium album*): Both the young greens and seeds of this weedy native are edible, and was in fact an agricultural crop for some Native Americans.

chicory (*Cichorium intybus*): Roots are used as a coffee substitute, young leaves can be used raw as salad greens, older leaves must be boiled (with the water drained) in order to be eaten.

orange daylily (*Hemerocallis fulva*): The flowers and fresh foliage and buds are edible raw or cooked. Flowers are used, often dried, in Chinese cuisine. Add fresh flower buds to your salad or stir-fry.

wild carrot (*Daucus carota*): Similar in flavor to cultivated carrots, but usually smaller, and creamy white in color. As with other edible biennial weeds, its best harvested in the fall of the first year of their life.

wild parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*): The roots of this species taste effectively identical to the cultivated plants. However, use extreme caution when harvesting, any skin contact with the plants leaves or juices plus sunlight will result in a severe chemical burn, a process known as phytophotodermatitis.

plantains (*Plantago* spp.): These lawn weeds have young leaves which are edible raw while the older leaves are edible if boiled.

curly dock (*Rumex crispus*): Young leaves can be eaten raw, older leaves must be cooked. The prolific seeds can be made into a flour.

dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*): The entire plant is edible if prepared properly.

prickly lettuce, wild lettuce and **sow thistle** (*Lactuca scariola*, *L. canadensis* and *Sonchus uliginosus*): These species are easily confused by the amateur botanist so they are listed here together. All are edible when boiled, older leaves will need to be parboiled.

Goat's beard aka **salsify** (*Tragopogon pratensis*): The roots of this species are a cultivated vegetable in some parts of the world. They should be collected before the plant develops a flower stalk in its second year of growth.

red clover and **white clover** (*Trifolium pratense* and *T. repens*): Many parts of these plants are edible raw and cooked. As a child I enjoyed plucking off the flowers and sucking the sweet nectar.

narrow-leaved cattail (*Typha angustifolia*): Many parts of this plant are edible including young sprouts and the roots. The native, wide-leaved cattail (*Typha latifolia*), is also abundant and edible.

tall nettles (*Urtica dioica*): Though native, nettles are listed here as a weed since they often act as such. Leaves can be eaten after being boiled to remove the bristles. Young leaves are preferred.