Foraging for Wild Plants

Roddy Maclean
Here are some of the plants that can be gathered and eaten in Scotland. You must be 100% certain of your plant identification in order to avoid any poisonous plants which look similar. Make sure that you gather plants in a way that is mindful, responsible and completely sustainable. There is guidance for responsible foraging at the end.

This publication was originally written in Gaelic and developed in partnership with Bòrd na Gàidhlig as part of the Gaelic Foraging Project in which the rich language and culture of the Gaels and close links with nature are explored.
Dandelion

*Beàrran Bhrìd*

**Use**
Tea or beer can be made from the leaves or roots. The roots (sliced) are good boiled and then fried for use in salads or stir fries (or raw in salads). The roasted roots can be mashed and made into a drink similar to coffee (which is caffeine free).

**Health and other uses**
Dandelion is a good source of iron, calcium and vitamin A.

Birch

*Beith*

**Use**
Birch sap is a natural spring tonic and syrup can be made from it. The leaves can be used to give a wintergreen taste to vegetables.

**Health and other uses**
The sap is only available for a few weeks of the year and is collected by drilling into the trunk.

English Stonecrop

*Biadh an t-Sìonnaidh*

**Use**
The leaves can be eaten raw or boiled. They have a slightly peppery taste.

**Health and other uses**
Don’t eat too much of it raw as it contains alkaloids that can cause drowsiness or stomach pain.

Watercress

*Biolair Uisge*

**Use**
Use older leaves which have a slightly ‘hot’ taste. Boil and use as a vegetable.

**Health and other uses**
Contains high levels of vitamin C. Avoid picking watercress near livestock and standing water due to the danger of fluke.
Hazel  
*Calltainn*

**Use**
The nuts are delicious roasted and can be used for desserts, cakes and sweets.

**Health and other uses**
Hazel nuts are a good source of vitamins B & E, K, Calcium, Magnesium. Hazel nuts are known as 'Cnò an Eòlais' or the 'Nut of Knowledge' in Gaelic folklore.

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Coltsfoot  
*Cluas Liath*

**Use**
Some people eat the leaves and flowers - but avoid eating too many – and a tea can also be made from the flowers. The leaves appear after the flowers have gone.

**Health and other uses**
Coltsfoot is a plant that has long been cultivated for its medicinal properties and it's often found in herbal preparations aimed at treating respiratory infections and sore throats. However, it's also controversial, as research has linked some of its key components to liver damage, blood clots, and even cancer.

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Pignut  
*Cnò-thalmhainn*

**Use**
The tubers, found by carefully following the thin underground stalk, are very tasty. They can be eaten raw and have a 'nutty' taste.

**Health and other uses**
Pignut can be abundant in old grassland, but don’t harvest too many.

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Rowan  
*Caorann*

**Use**
Rowan jelly is made from the berries in autumn – which adds a great taste to meat.

**Health and other uses**
High in vitamin C and fibre, and also an anti-oxidant. Do not eat the berries raw.

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Cow Parsley  
*Costag Fhiadhain*

**Use**
The leaves may be used as an alternative to parsley – they are good with fish. But note - cow parsley sometimes grows beside hemlock which looks very similar and is deadly poisonous. Familiarity with the carrot family in general (umbellifers) is essential.
Wild Garlic, Ramsons
*Creamh*

*Use*
The leaves of wild garlic appear in spring and may be used as an alternative to spring onions or garlic and make great pesto. Lightly pickled, the unopened flowers can be kept for ages and go well in salads or with cheese.

*Health and other uses*
Don’t eat the bulbs - leave them in the ground; they aren’t particularly tasty anyway.

Meadowsweet
*Crios Chù Chulainn*

*Use*
Appears in April and flowers in June and July. The abundant flowers are good for adding flavour to sweet foods and make a delicious cordial. The young leaves can be used as a salad vegetable (although the flavour is not to everyone’s liking).

*Health and other uses*
The Gaelic name is connected to the great Gaelic warrior, Cù Chulainn.

Greater Plantain
*Cuach Phàdraig*

*Use*
The youngest leaves can be used in salads but the leaves are better boiled with the veins removed - it has a mushroomy taste and an appearance similar to spinach.

*Health and other uses*
Traditionally used by the Gaels as a healing poultice.

Common Nettle
*Deanntag*

*Use*
Young leaves make an excellent soup and can be used whenever you would use young spinach. Harvest the youngest leaves from the top of the plant in spring and autumn. Regular trimming encourages a fresh supply of new growth. Boil or steam - which removes the stinging hairs.

*Health and other uses*
Nettles are a good source of protein, Calcium and other minerals, vitamin C and beta-carotene. Avoid during summer.

Cow parsley is common except in the northern Highlands, Lewis and Harris. The Gaelic name ‘costag fhiadhain’ means ‘wild chervil’.
Bramble

Dris

Use
Brambles are among the best foraged food that can be gathered and make delicious puddings and jams. Tea can also be made from the leaves.

Health and other uses
Beware of the thorns! Known in Gaelic folklore as ‘an dris bheannaichte’ - ‘the blessed briar’.

Elder

Droman

Use
The cream coloured flowers of the elder tree can be gathered between May and July. A sweet tasting cordial or champagne can be made. The flowers are really good also as a light, starter snack when fried in tempura batter. The deep red berries that follow are good for making wine, jam and chutney and vinegar.

Health and other uses
Don’t gather too many flowers as there will be no berries in the autumn!

Beech

Faidhbhile

Use
The young leaves can be eaten (before they have properly opened, when they are bright green) and are good with asparagus or in a salad. An alcoholic drink can be made from them too. Oil can be extracted from the masts or fruits.

Health and other uses
Beech was not native to the Highlands and therefore few traditional uses are to be found in Gaelic culture.

Wood Sorrel

Feada Coille

Use
The leaves have a sharp taste and are good in salads, dressings and sweets. It’s lemony taste goes very well with fish. The flowers are also tasty in salads.

Health and other uses
Good source of vitamin C and beta-carotene. Don’t tear off the whole plant. Don’t eat too much as it contains oxalic acid.

Chickweed

Fliodh

Use
The young leaves are good in salads and used in a similar way to spinach.

Heather

Fraoch
Heather
*Fraoch*
**Use**
The flowers are used to make a tea (rich in vitamin C) or as a flavouring in baking.

**Heath and other uses**
Rich in Magnesium, Phosphorous, Copper, vitamins C, B6, B12, D & A.

**Heather was also used for thatching and in mattresses. Cross-leaved Heath is useful for scouring pots.**

Douglas Fir
*Giuthas MhicDhùghlais*
**Use**
The young needles are soft and edible and can be used to make a tea (rich in vitamin C) or as a flavouring in baking.

**Health and other uses**
This tree is not native to Scotland - it therefore is little mentioned in Gaelic culture.

Elm
*Leamhan*
**Use**
The young seeds can be eaten before they dry out. They are slightly sweet and good in salads.

**Health and other uses**
Elm seeds are particularly nutritious, containing up to 45% crude protein.

Ribwort Plantain
*Slàn-lus*
**Health and other uses**
This tree is not native to Scotland - it therefore is little mentioned in Gaelic culture.

Larch
*Learag*
**Use**
An alcoholic drink (similar to vodka) can be made from the fresh young tips in spring?

**Health and other uses**
This tree is not native to Scotland - it therefore is little mentioned in Gaelic culture.

Lady’s Bedstraw
*Lus an Leasaich*
**Use**
The roots are useful for dyeing (red) and a tea is made from the flowers. The plant is also used to curdle milk;

**Health and other uses**
Called ‘Rù’ in Uist and not to be found in Lewis and the extreme north of the mainland.
Yarrow
*Lus Chasghadh na Fala*

**Use**
The leaves are used in salads and for making a tea. Good in sauces, particularly with fish.

**Health and other uses**
Yarrow was used in the Highlands to clot blood.

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**Blaeberry**
*Lus nan Dearc*

**Use**
Exceptionally good flavour from the berries. They may be eaten raw and used to flavour drinks.

**Health and other uses**
High in anti-oxidants.

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**Wood Avens**
*Machall Coille*

**Use**
The leaves are good in soups and stews. Use the roots (raw or dried) as an alternative to cloves.

**Health and other uses**
Found at forest edges and roadsides. Not present in the Western Isles.

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**Mint**
*Meannt*

**Use**
Many uses. The leaves are good in condiments, salads and sweets, and also to make tea.

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**Wild Angelica**
*Lus nam Buadh*

**Use**
The stalks are tasty when sugared and good in cakes; they may be used instead of celery in sauces. The leaves add flavour to salad and cheese sauce.

**Health and other uses**
Unmistakeable when the flowers appear in July.

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**Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage**
*Lus nan Laogh*

**Use**
Has a pleasant enough taste although slightly bitter. The leaves are good in salads in spring and can also be cooked.

**Health and other uses**
Sometimes to be found in marshy areas and at springs - make sure you don’t trample the surrounding environment when collecting.

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**Scotland’s Natural Larder**
FORAGING FOR WILD PLANTS
Sweet Cicely  
*Mirr*  
**Use**  
Has a distinctive aroma and taste similar to aniseed.  
Use the leaves in salads and with fish; also to add flavour to drinks such as vodka. Sweet cicely sometimes grows beside hemlock which looks very similar and is deadly poisonous. Once again, familiarity with the carrot family in general (umbellifers) is essential.  
**Health and other uses**  

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Hogweed  
*Odharan*  
**Use**  
Identify your hogweed area and visit it year after year.  
Fry the very young shoots in butter. Use the dried seeds as a spice instead of cardamom.  
**Health and other uses**  
Be careful to avoid Giant Hogweed.  

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Dog Rose  
*Preas nam Mucag*  
**Use**  
Syrup is made from the rose hips. The petals are good in salads and sweets.  
**Health and other uses**  
High in vitamin C. The hips can still be gathered in winter.  

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Bog Myrtle  
*Roid*  
**Use**  
The leaves are used to flavour beer and other drinks. Good for roasting with chicken.  
**Health and other uses**  
Will keep midges at bay!  

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Common Sorrel  
*Samh*  
**Use**  
The leaves have a bitter taste; can be used in recipes as a substitute for vinegar or lemon. Good with fish and in French cuisine, also in salads and cooked. Sheep’s Sorrel is used in almost the same way. There is a saying in South Uist - ‘cho searbh ri súgh nam buinteagan’ - ‘as bitter as the juice of Sheep’s Sorrel’.  
**Health and other uses**  
High in vitamin C. Also high in oxalic acid, so don’t eat too much of it.  

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White Clover  
*Seamrag Bhàn*  
**Use**  
Use the flowers in bread, soup and stew. They will add a pea-like taste to salads. Leaves can be used in salads and condiments too.  
**Health and other uses**  
Leaves are high in protein, Calcium, Magnesium and thiamine.
Red Clover

*Seamrag Dhearg*

**Use**
(See White Clover).

**Health and other uses**
Leaves are high in protein, Calcium, Magnesium and thiamine.

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Hairy Bittercress

*Searbh-bhiolar Ghiobach*

**Use**
The leaves have a strong, bitter, peppery taste and can be used in salads and to make pesto.

**Health and other uses**
High in vitamins A & C and Calcium, Phosphorous and Magnesium.

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Hawthorn

*Sgitheach*

**Use**
Young buds and fresh leaves can be eaten in spring – when they ‘harden and go shiny, they are less palatable. The flowers are good in salads (when picked young) and with rabbit.

The haw berries are good for making jelly that goes deliciously with meat.

**Health and other uses**
The haws, flowers and leaves are good for the heart and the haws are a good source of vitamin C.

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Primrose

*Sòbhrag*

**Use**
The leaves are good in salads or condiments and are sweet tasting. The flowers can be used in salads, with roasted meat or can be sweetened with sugar and wine can also be made from the flowers.

**Health and other uses**
Pick from an area that is ‘speckled’ with primroses and take care not to tear out the roots.

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Ribwort Plantain

*Slàn-lus*

**Use**
Can be used in the same way as Greater Plantain.

**Health and other uses**
Good source of vitamin C.

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Lime

*Teile*

**Use**
The buds and fresh leaves are tasty when eaten raw and tea can be made from the flowers.

**Health and other uses**
Some say that the tea is good for the heart and for digestion.

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Wood Sorrel

*Feada Coille*
Sea Beet
*Biatas Mara*

**Use**
Better in spring, but good to eat throughout the year, beet is found above the shore. The leaves are tasty, either raw or cooked; they are good steamed. Tasty in soups, or with fish or lamb.

**Health and other uses**
Rich in vitamins and minerals. Cut off the leaves but don’t remove the whole plant.

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Silverweed
*Brisgean*

**Use**
The roots can be roasted (or boiled or fried) - similar to parsnip. The roots can be ground and made into flour (for making bread). **Please note** that to uproot any plant, you must have the landowner’s permission.

**Health and other uses**
‘Brisgean beannaichte an earraich - Seachdamh aran a’ Ghàidheil’ - ‘Blessed silverweed of spring - seventh bread of the Gael’ - an important source of food in times of hunger. As ever, do not pick any plant except in places where it is commonly found.

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Sea Kale
*Càl na mara*

**Use**
Found above the shoreline. The stalks and leaves are tasty in spring (purple to begin with, turning green). Cook the stalks as you would asparagus; the leaves as cabbage, before they get too big. The stalks can be eaten raw in salads. The flowers appear in May and look similar to broccoli. Seed pods are similar to peas and taste like cabbage.

**Health and other uses**
Contains plenty of fibre. High in iodine, sulphur, vitamin C and minerals. Used by many Europe cultures, but not as common in Scotland, especially in the north - ensure that it is foraged sustainably.
Sea Sandwort  
*Lus a’ Ghoill*

**Use**
Found above the shoreline in sand or shingle. The stalks and young leaves are tasty (slightly bitter) and better before flowering (they are very small); use as a potherb. The leaves can be pickled to make sauerkraut.

**Health and other uses**
High in vitamins A and C.

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Sea Radish  
*Meacan Ragaim Uisge*

**Use**
Good steamed as a winter vegetable (when the plant is short); the stalks are good in stir fries. Eat the stalks and leaves as vegetables (or sushi) and the young seed pods as you would eat radishes. Has a strong, slightly hot taste.

**Health and other uses**
Found near the shore. Common in the south-west of Scotland (Galloway). The yellow flowers are in the shape of a cross. The plant grows quite tall in summer.

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Sea Buckthorn  
*Ràmh-dhroigheann Mara*

**Use**
The fruit (orange, ripe in autumn) is rich in vitamin C and anti-oxidants and has a sharp taste. The juice can be drunk, or the berries and leaves dried and infused as a tea.

**Health and other uses**
Grows naturally behind beaches but can spread inland.

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Sea Plantain  
*Slàn-lus na Mara*

**Use**
The leaves can be eaten raw or cooked and are tasty, especially with fish. The seeds are used in the same way or ground to make flour.

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Silverweed  
*Brisgean*

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Common Scurvy-grass  
*Maraiche*

**Use**
Use the leaves as a spice – they are strong tasting like mustard or horseradish.

**Health and other uses**
Used in the past by sailors to keep scurvy at bay. High in vitamin C. Found above the shoreline.

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Sea Radish  
*Meacan Ragaim Uisge*
Foraging for Seaweed

**Carrageen**

*Cairgein*

Use
Low on the shore, grows on rocks.

Gathered especially in spring. Dried and stored. Eaten as salad in Japan but usually used as a thickening agent in jelly in Scotland. Good for soups and stews and as a sweet with milk and sugar.

Health and other uses
Traditionally used by those suffering with a cough. A balanced food, high in magnesium.

**Dulse**

*Duileasg*

Use
Found low on the shoreline, on rocks and is gathered, especially in summer. It is tasty raw - fresh or dried and has a salty, nutty taste. Wash in water and mix in salads. Fry in butter or make crisps with it. Is often eaten as dulse pudding.

Health and other uses
High in protein, minerals, vitamins and trace elements. Low in sodium, high in vitamin K.
Pepper Dulse
*Duileasg Piobarach*

**Use**
Good in sauces, especially with fish and in stir-fries. Used as an alternative to pepper.

**Health and other uses**
Little research has been conducted.

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Dumont's Tubular Weed
*Feamainn Phiobach*

**Use**
In pools and mid-shore where there is shelter.
Tasty raw at the shore or in salads and sushi. Similar to noodles in soup and stews but fragile if boiled too vigorously. Sprinkle with flour and fry. Tastiest in spring.

**Health and other uses**
Shorter and finer than dead-man's-rope, which isn't pleasant at all.

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Channelled Wrack
*Feamainn Chìrean*

**Use**
High on the shore.
Fed to cattle in the Highlands but also eaten by humans; tastes good when the air-filled bladders are present.

**Health and other uses**
High in vitamin C and trace elements, including Selenium.

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Sea Lettuce
*Glasag*

**Use**
Often brought to shore by the tide.
Good eaten raw in salads and omelettes, with fish or meaty stews. Can be used in bread such as focaccia.

**Health and other uses**
High in protein, iron, vitamin B12, Calcium, Magnesium, Manganese. Higher in vitamin C in summer.

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Gutweed
*Glasag Chaolanach*

**Use**
Found throughout the shoreline.
Use as you would sea lettuce. Good fried, especially when brown and hard.

**Health and other uses**
High in Calcium and trace...
elements and vitamins. But be careful - it is often to be found in abundance close to sewage outflow.

Sea-thong

*lallan Mara*

Use
Found low on the shore.
Adds a lamb-like taste to soups and stews and a nutty taste to salad and pasta. Mix with spaghetti to add some extra flavour.

Health and other uses.
High in Calcium, Magnesium, trace elements and vitamins.

Sweet or Sugar Kelp

*Langadal, Ròc*

Use
Found below the sandeel shore. Comes to shore in heaps.
Sweet, especially when not too young. Eaten raw or roasted. Can be dried or frozen to preserve it. Good with many types of food, from stews to biscuits and cakes. Makes good crisps and ‘milsean-mara’ or ‘sea-sweets’.

Health and other uses
Contains a variety of minerals, vitamins and trace elements. BUT high in iodine - so don't eat too much of it.
Badderlocks

Use
*Mircean*

Found at low tide at the time of spring-tide.

Similar to Japanese *wakame* but must be cooked for 40 minutes, compared with 15 mins for *wakame*. Good for making soup (eg miso soup). Has a chicken-like taste cooked with rice. Good in salads if steeped beforehand in lemon juice. If steeped in water, the water can then be used as a cooking liquid.

Health and other uses
High in Calcium, vitamin B & trace elements. Highest in vitamin C at the end of spring. High in vitamin K in early summer. High in vitamin B12 in winter and early spring.

Sloke, Laver
*Slocan*

Use
Finely textured seaweed that grows thickly on rocks; colour between brown and purple.


Can be used in recipes as an alternative to spinach. Good also with sweets, especially with chocolate and ginger.

Health and other uses
High in vitamins A, B, C, E, K, thiamine and beta-carotene. Has more protein than other seaweeds. A great amount can be eaten without going over the WHO recommended level of iodine. High levels of phosphorous, potassium, iron, copper, manganese and zinc.

Oarweed, Sea Tangle, Forest Kelp
*Stamh*

Use
It grows thickly at the bottom of the shore.


Health and other uses
High in minerals, vitamins and trace elements. Care must be taken though as it contains high levels of iodine.
Responsible foraging – basic principles

Foraging is a good and healthy way to connect with nature. The number of people who enjoy foraging has increased greatly, and they are adding to their diet with food that is natural, tasty and nutritious.

We want you to take great pleasure in your foraging but also want you to do it in a way that is sympathetic to both the environment and to other people who use the same place. You will want to avoid places where lots of people exercise their dogs. If you follow the principles below, your foraging will be both mindful and inconspicuous.

You can be sympathetic to nature by

- gathering carefully, avoiding damage to the plant roots or fungus mycelium
- selecting plants which are abundant, without gathering anything that is rare or unusual
- not taking too much from any one plant or tree and by gathering in different areas
- cutting, rather than tearing seaweed, to leave the ‘holdfast’ its ‘root’, attached to the rocks
- walking only where you need to, without trampling plants
- taking away only what you will use, without removing too much and leaving enough for mammals, birds and insects. Sometimes this will be difficult as others may follow you, reducing what is left still further.

Stay safe

- Make sure you are certain of the identity of the plants or fungus you are foraging. These skills require to be learned, but it becomes easy with experience
- Some plants and fungi are deadly poisonous; make sure you can recognise these. If you are in any doubt, do not pick.
- Be aware of changes in the weather and state of the tides if you are foraging at the shore.
- If you are gathering in wet places close to animal pasture, boil the plant, eg watercress, due to the danger of liver fluke.
Glossary

anti-oxidant ........ ana-ogsadant
beech mast ........ bàchar
vitamin ........... beothaman
spinach ........... bloinigean-gàrraidh
fermenting ........ brachadh
steaming (cooking). ceò-theasachadh
cloves ........... clomhais
veins ............. cuislean
parsnip ........... curran-geal
wild (not cultivated) fiadhain
fibre ............. freumhag
liver fluke ........ glup
hemlock .......... iteodha
deadly poisonous
........................ marbhtach puinnseanta
radish ........... meacan-ruadh
mineral ........... mèinnear
potherb .......... praiseach
horseradish ...... ràcadal
foraging .......... rùrachd
(oxalic) acid ....... searbhag (ogsàlach)
mustard .......... sgeallan
sap .............. snodhach
sustainable ..... so-sheasmhach
scurvy .......... tachas tioram (an)

Photographs by Lorne Gill/SNH and Mark Williams.