

Wild Forest Foods: A Brief Introduction to Harvesting and Marketing Edible Plants and Fungi from Small Private Forestlands in the Pacific Northwest

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Box 1. Wild foods found in Pacific Northwest Forests

Berries

- Blackberry
- Elderberry
- Huckleberry
- Lingonberry
- Oregon grape
- Wild Plum

Edible greens/roots/tubers

- Camas
- Chickweed
- Lady fern fiddleheads
- Miner's lettuce
- Nettle
- Watercress
- Wild onion

Edible fungi

- Chanterelle
- King bolete
- Hedgehog
- Morels
- Matsutake
- Oregon black truffle
- Oregon white truffle

Syrups

- Big leaf maple syrup
- Birch syrup

Flavorings

- Prince's pine (Pipsissewa)

Seeds and Nuts

- Pinyon seeds
- Hazelnuts

Overview

Pacific Northwest forests offer a wide array of wild foods. Many wild fruits, stems, leaves, roots, tubers, nuts, saps, mushrooms, and truffles have nutritional as well as commercial value. Many of these products are harvested from public forests (federal, state, local) or large, private industrial forestlands; however, small to medium-sized private forestland owners can also earn supplemental income from the sale of wild foods from their land. This document provides a brief overview of the kinds of wild edible products that small private forest landowners might find on their land, and possible market outlets for their products.



Cascade huckleberries are an abundant and delicious wild food found in higher elevations forests.

What are Wild Forest Foods?

In theory, wild forest foods are edible products that require little or no cultivation and grow “naturally” as part of a forest ecosystem. In reality, most forest systems are under some type of management regime (e.g., timber, wildlife, recreation, or multi-use purposes), and the presence and abundance of edible plants and fungi is determined by these management preferences. Landowners interested in commercially marketing wild foods from their land will likely need to manage or “tend” the land in some way to promote the occurrence of these species. Although edible species may be present, activities such as seeding, pruning, weeding, and/or burning may be necessary to generate enough production to make commercial sales worthwhile. Other more intensive agricultural practices, such as irrigating, plowing, and fertilizing would be minimal, although in some situations these practices may be necessary to establish a desired crop. In general, however, wild or semi-wild foods require low-input management practices that promote the long-term sustainability of the crop and natural system.

There are potentially dozens, if not hundreds, of edible species that can be found in Pacific Northwest forests. Box 1 lists some of the species a small forest landowner may encounter on his/her land that have commercial markets.

Market Potential

Wild forest foods tend to be valued for their unique qualities (flavor, aroma, appearance, fragrance, texture and/or nutritional qualities) rather than for their presence in large commodity markets. Wild foods thus tend to fall into niche markets. Branding food as “wild” can be a niche in itself. Potential target audiences for wild foods include gourmet restaurants and resorts, specialty markets, farmers markets, farm stands, tourist and gift shops, direct web sales to domestic buyers, consolidation buyers, processors, and international markets. Establishing a U-pick operation around wild foods is another option.

The amount of money earned from selling wild forest foods will depend on the species present on your land, and the amount of time, money, and energy you are willing to invest. Earnings will also depend on the market prices for a particular species. For example, wild mushrooms have strong, established markets both nationally and internationally. Markets are developing for species such as native Oregon truffles, which can reach values as high as \$250/lb. retail. There is also a growing wild foods movement among certain food aficionados or “foodies” that include an interest in wild berries and wild greens.



Chanterelle mushrooms are an abundant forest food with a strong, established market.

Steps to Get Started

The first step to starting a business marketing wild forest foods from your land is to understand what species are currently present and also what potential species could exist on your land. If you are unfamiliar with edible species, you may need to enlist the help of a knowledgeable botanist or wildcrafter to help inventory your land. To better understand the market for wild foods, conduct a search of what products are being sold on-line, in gourmet restaurants, local tourism shops, in specialty grocery stores, and also featured on the Food Network or other food-based programs and magazines.

Once you have an idea of your inventory and demand, you may wish to select certain species with the highest market potential. You may want to select a suite of different species and products depending on season and availability. Bring samples of your products to specialty markets and restaurants. Most wholesale buyers will generally want large, consistent volumes of product, so unless you have a large volume, you may want to stick with smaller, more direct markets. Potential costs include labor, equipment, processing, packaging, storing, shipping, and marketing. Most fresh products will have a seasonal demand. Processing foods (e.g., drying, canning, or extracting) will help extend shelf life, reduce loss from spoilage and lower shipping costs.

Resources

- Oregon State University/Oregon Dept. of Ag. - Food Innovation Center, Portland, OR. (503) 872-6680. <http://fic.oregonstate.edu/>. Provides assistance with product development and marketing.
- John N. Kallas, Wild Food Adventures, Portland, OR. (503) 775-3828. www.wildfoodadventures.com. Author of articles and books on wild foods, leads workshops and tours on wild foods.
- Vasquez, Stephanie and Lita Buttolph. 2010. Huckleberry Market Analysis: A Business Planning Guide for Small Woodland Owners. www.ntfpinfo.us.

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