

NATURALLY: Native ramps signal healthy forests, provide health benefits

- By MARIE OLSON Special to the Gazette
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My many walks in White’s Woods have brought me pleasures affecting all my senses. I have walked the trails in all seasons when, all of a sudden, on one beautiful spring morning, there it was — a large patch of ramps.

Ramps in our White’s Woods, a valuable early spring green, were spreading extensively at my feet. How could I have missed them for so long? I guess I was not attuned enough to my environment, and I must admit, I did not know so much about them.

Ramps or *allium tricoccum* are also called wild onions, wild garlic or wild leeks. In France, they call it “bear garlic” because it is one of the first greens bears feast on to help them emerge from their winter lethargy. They grow under deciduous trees in moist and well-drained soil with a good balance of shade

and sun and usually on a slope. Their root system is densely entwined so they tend to grow in large colonies and can spread quite extensively.

I have noticed that the patch in White's Woods is getting larger and larger each year, which makes me very happy. They grow before the leaves start shading the understory, usually in mid-April, and last only for about three weeks. After that, they flower and then disappear from our view.

Ramps have one or two broad flat leaves of an intense green, a purplish stem and a white bulb buried in the soil. To identify ramps, rub a leaf and it will release a very fragrant garlic flavor that is unmistakable. Lilies of the Valley, a close look-alike, do not have any garlic smell and are highly toxic. The beginning forager with a little sense of smell should make that differentiation quite easily.

This spring delicacy is a native of our region and grows throughout the Appalachia, all the way up to Canada, although the distribution is now shrinking. There are numerous traditional festivals celebrating ramps, including a few in Pennsylvania.

Today their importance is not only limited to Appalachian culture but is also greatly appreciated by chefs and people who enjoy eating seasonal products. Ramps have become so popular that there is great concern about overharvesting.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) classifies ramps as "special concern" in Maine, Rhode Island and Tennessee. The National Park Service recently announced that, due to population decline, ramp harvesting will no longer be allowed in their parks in West Virginia.

Ramps take an average of five to seven years to develop fully from seeds. When indigenous people harvested it, they usually only harvested the leaves, leaving the bulb in place and allowing that bulb to grow new leaves next season.

If you do harvest ramps, do so sustainably. Take only what you need, leave the bulb undisturbed, and take only one leaf out of each plant. Taking a few bulbs from a large patch might be fine, especially if the intention is to replant them somewhere else. A knife is necessary to harvest the leaves to avoid pulling the bulb out.

Do not harvest wild foods on public lands such as White's Woods, as over-harvesting by multiple individuals can lead to declines in healthy plant populations. Harvest ethically and carefully on private lands to ensure that the population of ramps stays healthy for future generations.

There are many reasons to explain the popularity of ramps. As one of the first spring greens, they offer many benefits. Indigenous people and Appalachian settlers recognized its value as a spring tonic — something that strengthens the body after a long winter and enhances elimination and digestion.

Very rich in vitamins A, C and K, ramps have antioxidant properties higher than tomatoes and red peppers and provides a good source of iron. Besides all these nutritional and medicinal properties, all parts of the ramps are edible and extremely delicious.

You can find a multitude of recipes using ramps. In my opinion, there is no better soup in the spring than ramps soup. The leaves and the stalks are enough to give it all the fragrance that you would want without adding any of the bulbs or additional garlic.

Ramp pesto is my second favorite and there again, I only use the leaves and the stalks. You can enjoy them cooked or uncooked, adding them to salads, soups and sandwiches, or experimenting as a seasoning.

Ricotta Scrambled Eggs And Buttered Ramps On Toast

Ingredients

4 Servings

8 ounces ramps

6 tablespoons unsalted butter, divided

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

6 large eggs

4 ounces fresh ricotta

Crushed red pepper flakes

4 slices toast

Preparation

Step 1

Cut ramps, including greens, crosswise into 1" pieces; set greens aside. Heat 3 Tbsp. butter in a medium skillet, preferably nonstick, and cook bulbs and stalks, stirring often, until softened, about 5 minutes.

Step 2

Add greens and cook, stirring, until tender, about 2 minutes; season with salt and pepper. Transfer to a plate.

Step 3

Heat remaining 3 Tbsp. butter in skillet. Lightly beat eggs, add to pan, and cook, stirring often, until just set. Mix in ricotta; season with salt and crushed red pepper flakes. Divide scrambled eggs among toast; top with ramps.

Marie Olson is the coordinator for the Indiana Community Garden and the Chevy Chase Food Forest. The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.

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