

Wild Flavors

in Maine's North Woods

AS AUTUMN MAKES its way across Maine's North Woods, it's the best time to forage for nuts, seeds, roots and fungi. Many of us have been foragers at one time or another, whether we pick wild berries or excel at the more complex skills of identifying delicious mushrooms. Foraging in Maine's North Woods is about slowing down as you walk and keeping an eye out for the hidden surprises the forest holds.

As you crunch across dried leaves and twigs, you may come across black trumpets, or the last burst of wild blueberries. From late summer to early fall, foragers might stumble on chanterelle mushrooms near mossy forest floors and hardwood trees.

When going out, you won't need much—comfortable shoes, a basket, gloves, and a sense of curiosity. In Maine's North Woods, there is plenty of ground to cover. Be sure to go with someone who has experience and let someone know where you are headed.

Safety is priority. The golden rule of foraging is to only pick what you know for sure is safe to eat. Bring a guidebook, or take photos for later identification, and only consume wild foods that you are 100% certain of its identification. Even if you end up going home empty-handed, the act of observation and mindfulness is its own reward.

Another rule followed by many foragers includes the rule of thirds. Allow 1/3 of the plant to be harvested (by you and your community), save 1/3 of the plant for animals to consume, and leave 1/3 of the plant for ecosystem health and regrowth. Follow a trail and keep an eye out for plants on the ground—one of the biggest threats foragers pose to these ecosystems is trampling the plants they aren't gathering. Be sure to be cautious, and ethical in your foraging so that foragers for years to come can continue the practice.

Often, foraging happens by coincidence. A hike to a scenic overlook becomes a berry hunt on the way back down, or a walk through the woods turns into a discovery of Chicken of the Woods mushrooms (and yes, they taste just like chicken). Some foragers even go after acorns, which can be turned into flour and used for baked goods.

In the end, you may have scored a small amount of forest treats or maybe a new collection of photos showing off the Maine foliage colors. You'll leave with a deeper connection to the woods and a fresh appreciation for the plants, animals, and fungi that live there.



Chicken of the woods mushroom

“For me, foraging is just another good excuse to go explore our landscapes. I’ve always had an intrinsic appreciation of landscape ecology and outdoor recreation; foraging provides another element of landscape appreciation and is a rewarding component to add to my hiking and canoeing adventures as well as daily ecological field work. We’re fortunate in Maine to have a lot of good resources available such as field guides and workshops that highlight the large abundance of natural foods found in our state and their health benefits over commercial foods.”

—MATT ARSENAULT, ECOLOGIST / BOTANIST

