

EDIBLE WEEDS

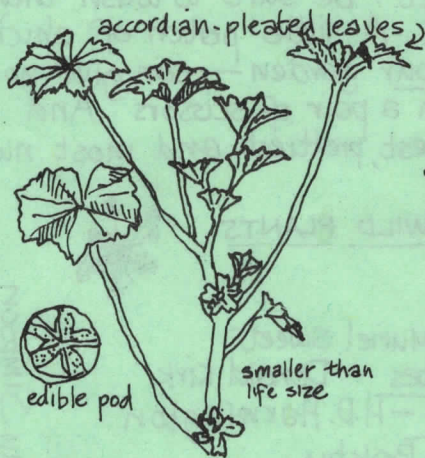
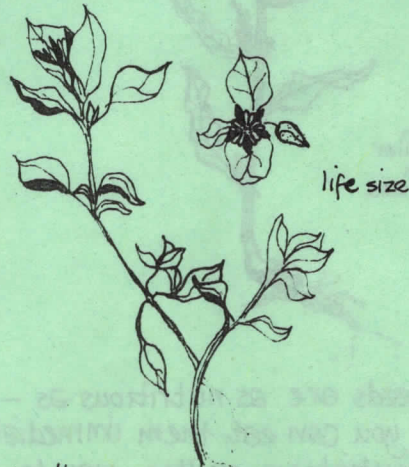
Now is a fine weed season. It is our winterspringtime when our weeds, better accommodated to the climate than the plants we deliberately tend, spring up as soon as the soil has received a good dose of rain. They thrive in the spaces of sunshine and warmth we receive now and then through the rainy season. If you are lucky, a carpet of these weeds will cover the bare spots in your garden, protecting them from erosion and compacting in the winter rains.

A weed is a plant you didn't plant and don't want -- at least now. Our common weeds have followed humans around the earth, thriving in garbage heaps and disturbed soil, such as is scuffed up beside roads or back doors. Earlier people, who looked closer at hand for their means of survival, developed symbiotic relationships with many plants that are today ignored or unloved. Modern people could greatly improve their nutrition as well as their relationship to their Earth, if they learned the habits and uses of some common weeds. After all, why kill a plant that can give you a good meal?

Here are some of our commonest weeds; I found four of them in one tiny lot behind the recycling center.

Chickweed (*stellaria media*) →

this is a delicate light green low-growing plant with little star-like white flowers. A tiny line of hair runs up the stem, changing sides at each joint. We've eaten it, and it's really good in salads, steamed, sautéed, or added to scrambled eggs. Milder than spinach, it is good throughout its growing season. You'll see it making a low cover on lawns & in flower beds.

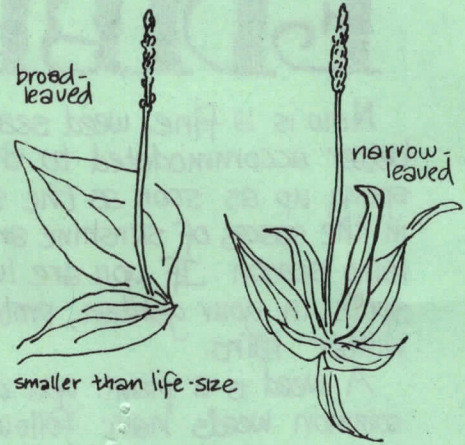


← Mallow (*malva*, the whole species)

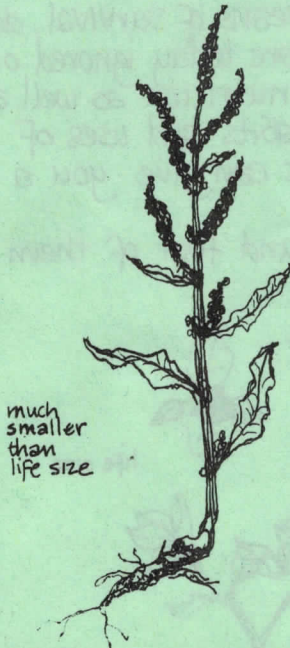
This family includes okra, hollyhock, and the marsh-mallow. (the latter contains a gelatinous substance that you can whip up.) The mallows around here frequently grow in vacant lots and parking strips. The older ones are now a couple feet high; the young are still hugging the ground. On the old ones you can see the remains of button-shaped pods. When these are green, they are good boiled or sautéed like okra. The leaves are edible, but not very good; better, perhaps, when they are very young. They make a good tea, though, soothing for sore throats.

narrow-leaved plantain or ribgrass (plantago) →

You also see a broader-leaved variety of this, (plantago major). The young leaves of both plants are good boiled or sautéed, or marinated in oil and vinegar. (I enjoyed the marinated leaves, chopped up, on buttered bread!) The plantain grows in lawns and parking strips and later sends up a brown seed stalk. The seeds may also be eaten; the coating is mucilaginous, and soaked in water, they make a laxative. Roasted, they can be made into flour.



← curly dock (rumex crispus)



Dock is a rather imposing weed. When young, a number of leaves hug the ground circling the stalk. The leaves on mature plants are curly-edged, and may reach a foot's length. A few leaves climb the stem, which later turns reddish-brown, and has seed pods. The long root is yellow. The leaves are richer than carrots in vitamin A, richer than oranges in vitamin C. Eat them young -- later they get too sour. Boil them until they taste good to you (you may have to change the water.) They're good creamed too. A few leaves will add flavor to a salad. The seeds can also be used to make a buckwheat-like flour. Dock, too, grows in lawns, vacant lots, etc.

Our weeds are as nutritious as -- or more so than -- our domesticated greens. Since you can eat them immediately after gathering, they don't lose flavor and nutrition on the way to the supermarket. Be sure to wash them, and don't gather from places that look sprayed. A little patch of chickweed -- if you're lucky, there'll be some in your garden -- can give you many meals if you just harvest the tops with a pair of scissors. And don't forget dandelions, one of the commonest, prettiest and most nutritious of all the "weeds"

SOME SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON EDIBLE WILD PLANTS

Stalking the Healthful Herb } Euell Gibbons
Stalking the Wild Asparagus }

Common Edible & useful Plants of the West -- Muriel Sweet

Wild Edible Plants of the Western United States -- Donald Kirk

Edible Native Plants of the Rocky Mountains -- H.D. Harrington

The Edible Wild -- Brandt Berglund & Clare Bolsby

Free for the Eating } Bradford Angier
Home in my Pack }
Living off the country }



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