



A Guide to Foraging in the Outer Hebrides



a Passion for our Wild Food



What is foraging?

Foraging is the act of gathering and harvesting wild foods. This handy guide has been created to help you to forage in the Outer Hebrides. From foraging on the shore for shellfish and seaweed to berries and funghi, there is lots to find in the islands.

Author, Fiona Bird has written this guide to show you how much fun there is to have wild food foraging in the Outer Hebrides.

Shellfish

You will find cockles and razor clams (spoots) on tidal beaches and mussels on rocks that are washed by a fast moving tide. Cockling is a brilliant family pastime. Mussels can be foraged with ease, but are tricky to clean, whereas cockling can take time to fill the bucket with a decent number for supper, but the cockles will clean themselves. Small children can use a sandbox rake, or bucket and spade to hunt cockles, which hide just a few centimetres under the sand. Move around the beach as you cockle— spread your foraging evenly.

Don't leave heaps of muddy sand behind you; this disturbs other wildlife. Be aware of local regulations, the spawning season, and the minimum size of clam or cockle that can be harvested. Tides can be dangerous; it is easy to become stranded on tidal beaches. Local fishermen are usually happy to advise you of the best beaches to harvest a small basket of bivalve molluscs for supper.



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*The topography of each island
in the Outer Hebrides is varied
and this will be
reflected in the forager's basket.*

Gorse

Folklore says when gorse is out of bloom, kissing is out of fashion. A relief then, that gorse is usually in flower somewhere. Although the best profusion of these yellow flowers are displayed in summer, gorse *Ulex europaeus* is a possibility for the November forager. Its flowers may be eaten in salads or made into wine, the buds pickled or used in syrups and yellow vinegar. Yellow dyeing is one of its favourite tricks. Blossom syrups or vinegars capture scent and taste of the countryside and are easy to make.

Sorrel *Rumex Acetosella*

A useful Outer Hebridean herb to use in your wild kitchen. It has a long cooking and medical history. In mild winters you can find sorrel all year round. Its leaf looks like a tiny smooth dock leaf but it has an arrow mark, where the leaf joins the stalk. In summer red sorrel seeds dance on the Machair in the breeze. Sorrel is sour tasting but in a Haribo sours, yummy kind of way. Scottish children use to chew on sorrel when they were thirsty. Before we could buy lemons in the supermarkets sorrel was used as a lemon replacement. Try using sorrel leaves in pesto. Add leaves to salads or dry sorrel leaves, grind them in a liquidiser and store them in a jar.

Rosa Rugosa

Native to Asia is displacing rose species in seashore habitats throughout northern Europe. However, bumble bees are attracted to it and the petals will colour syrups pink and add scented flavour to cooking. Look out for the candy-floss pink flowers with an intoxicating scent in: overgrown hedgerows, sand dunes, cliffs, roadsides and on waste ground. Forage the petals alone; don't pull the whole rose away, shaking it well to allow insects to relocate. The birds and bees also enjoy wild flowers' nectar so leave some blossom for wildlife and for autumn berries and hips too. In autumn you can return to pick the fat *Rosa rugosa* hips to use in chutneys, gin and syrup. As for the petals add them to baking, apricot jam, sorbet and fruit curds. Or simply steep them in water and then boil the strained scented water with sugar to make a hectic pink *Rosa rugosa* syrup. This syrup is delicious spooned over ice-cream. Beware of the fine hairs which are used in itching powder. One of our favourite family recipes using rose hip juice, mixes it 50:50 with apple juice, with sugar to taste and gelatine to set – child's play. It's jelly.

Three Cornered Leeks *Allium Triquetrum*

I have yet to find ramsons in the Outer Hebrides but there is plenty of the non native, invasive three cornered leeks I interchange three cornered leeks with wild garlic in recipes but they are not the same plant. The leaves of three cornered leeks are narrow and the flowers white with a green line. Three cornered leek is non native and an invasive pest, and on this occasion tugging up the roots is helpful too.



Sorrel



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Blaeberries

Fiona's Top Foraging Tips

- Do not cook with storm cast or floating seaweed. Pick seaweed which is still growing - attached by its holdfast.
- Check tide times before you go. Ask a local fisherman or check online— a low spring tide is best.
- Take a separate bag for each species. This makes life less chaotic back in the kitchen.
- Rinse the seaweed in rock pools before popping it in bag, allowing sea residents to re-house locally
- Identify and avoid the *Desmarestia* spp (which gives off sulphuric acid when cut) and pick living not storm cast seaweed, on sea-shore that is far from human effluence.
- Use scissors or a sharp knife to cut your seaweed and this will ensure further growth.

Foragers should be mindful the rules of the countryside and of Dante's fourth circle – greed. Pick enough for yourself, no more and don't tug up any roots or holdfasts so that foraging for Wild Food can be enjoyed by all.

Blaeberries

Birds and deer graze on blaeberries so unsurprisingly these tiny blue fruits which grow on the hills, compliment game in the kitchen. The small berries are fiendishly difficult to pick, often there is only one berry on each plant. In mid summer children will be particularly good at finding these Lilliputian blaeberries but watch out for rabbit holes hidden in the heather. Use blaeberries in any recipe that asks for blueberries.

Wild Thyme *Thymus serpyllum*

Over the summer months the hills and pathways of the Western isles are covered with the tiny, purple flowering herb, wild thyme. It is milder than the garden herb so add it generously to flavour: lamb, stuffing, baking or savoury sauces. Hebridean ladies used thyme to scent their clothing in much the same way that people use lavender sachets. Cooking aside, kick off your shoes and walking barefoot on mountain thyme –free Hebridean foot aromatherapy.



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The lacework of lochans and long white sandy beaches of the Outer Hebrides are renowned as a haven for flora and wild life. Little however, is spoken of the magical space that reveals the ocean's seaweeds at low tide. Seaweeds are grouped by colour and different species are found in each tidal zone.

Many seaweeds are kitchen chameleons— they change colour when cooked. Unlike fungi, seaweeds are not toxic, although some are tastier than others.

Carrageen (*Chondrus crispus*) and Grape pip weed (*Mastocarpus stellatus*) are red seaweeds that can be found at low tide hanging from rocks or carpeting pebbles. If you are exploring rock pools, you will probably come across carrageen. Use scissors to cut its tiny stipes from the rock, but leave plenty to encourage regrowth. Grape pip weed is also called carrageen. It isn't smooth like *Chondrus crispus* but bristly and usually covered in bubbly warts. Carrageen is a setting agent that's used commercially in toothpaste, beer and ice cream. It is very useful to vegan and vegetarian cooks.

Dulse (*Palmaria palmata*) is a red seaweed that you'll find in deep water growing on rocks and other seaweeds (as an epiphyte). It looks like a hand with short fingers and this may be where its botanical name, Palma, comes from. Dulse has a long history of being useful to man and is probably one of the oldest foods eaten by coastal people in times of hardship.

Laver Porphyra is a red seaweed, although it may look green, brown. It is found on rocks in the intertidal zone. Laver can survive the wind and being out of seawater. . Cut laver with scissors as the tide is coming in - the laver floats on the incoming tide and the seawater helps to wash the sand away too.

Sea spaghetti or thong weed is easily spied because it looks like floating pasta. It hangs from rocks at the low water mark and is attached to the rocks. Early in the season sea spaghetti cooks in noodle time. Novice seaweed eaters might try serving sea spaghetti 50:50 with wheat pasta.

Sea lettuce looks like common-or-garden round lettuce. There are lots of species of green seaweed and they are tricky to identify correctly. They are often grouped as *Ulva* spp. Sea lettuce likes growing where fresh water flows into the sea, but don't pick it here. Instead, cut sea lettuce from rock pools, where there is no worry of contamination from human waste. Sea lettuce looks like laver but it's thicker and emerald green; this is why it is sometimes called green nori.



Carrageen



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Fiona is a graduate of The University of St Andrews, mother of six and a former BBC Masterchef finalist. She divides her time between Angus and the Outer Hebridean Isle of South Uist, where her husband is the local doctor. Fiona is often seen on her bicycle with a basket full of seaweed or wild edibles and is unusually late for church.

Fiona is the author of Kids' Kitchen (Barefoot Books 2009), The Forager's Kitchen (Cico Books 2013) and Seaweed in the Kitchen (Prospect Books 2015). She is a wild food blogger for The Huffington Post UK. Let Your Kids Go Wild Outside (Cico Books April 2016) is her fourth book.



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