







BEN BRUMAGNE

THE FORAGING BOOK

Gathering and cooking edible wild plants

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DEAR READER, NATURE LOVER, FORAGER

I'm so glad this book has found its way to you. It is a book I am very proud of; after many years of leading foraging walks, it felt almost inevitable that I would one day gather my accumulated knowledge between two covers. It was always a dream of mine, and that dream has come true. This book is the result of many journeys, courses, collaborations, and meetings with many great people, as well as, of course, the efforts of the team at our foraging collective Forest To Plate.

I would like to thank them all by name, but perhaps I should first introduce myself: I'm the founder of Forest To Plate, which I started in 2015. It was the first step in a fantastic adventure that continues today. After my culinary travels around the world, extreme cycling tours, and education in fields like organic agriculture and herbalism, I have been intensively active in helping people discover the world of edible nature. Now based in the French Ardennes, I have built a fantastic and dedicated team, and together we conduct foraging courses, workshops, and team-building events both here and abroad.

This book isn't a true field guide, nor is it a botanical bible or a compendium of stories—I recommend you see it more as a source of inspiration. I've selected fifty flavourful plants that are common to very common throughout our region. For each, I tell a story or anecdote about the plant, offer tips for identifying it, and best of all: suggest ways to use it on your plate. And you might like to know that I developed some of these recipes in collaboration with a few of my favourite chefs. In the end, that's what Forest To Plate is all about: giving people a taste of nature.

My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, who always supported me through the years, and to my colleague Pieter-Jan Van Assche for his daily dedication to Forest To Plate and his efforts in bringing this book to life.

In recent years, I've had the good fortune to work with a whole lineup of fantastic people: Quinten Prinsen, Pieter-Jan Lint, Niel Deweerdt, Toos Vergote, Anna Wynants, Yuri Andries, Roxane Hoedemaekers, Martine Van Huffel, Maxim Willems, Victoria Lorenz, Steven Desair, Louis De Jaeger, Bart Van Parijs, Nele Deweerdt, Yo De Beule, Zach Ashton, Natalie Schrauwen, Mike De Roover and many others; as well as a few inspiring businesses, particularly the Brussels Beer Project and The Botanist Gin. My heartfelt thanks to everyone who has been a part of this journey.

I hope this book sets you on the same path that I have followed all these years: the discovery of a wild and authentic cuisine.

Happy reading, happy foraging, and happy eating!

BEN BRUMAGNE







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INTRODUCTION

the foraging book

FORAGING: WHERE DO YOU START?

Is this your first time eating something that grows wild? Not sure which plants are edible and which are not? Or does the thought of foraging for the first time without guidance feel rather daunting? The good news is that it is not as difficult as it may seem. After all, human beings have been doing it for tens of thousands of years. Of course, there are a few rules you can learn to make it simpler, more fun, and most importantly, safer.

In this introduction I'll describe the most important points you should keep in mind so that your first steps into the world of foraging are safe and enjoyable.

THE RULES OF FORAGING

It's important to know that you can't just forage anywhere. You need to respect all local rules and know how to treat the environment with respect. In the next chapter I'm going to show you how.

WHAT TO BRING WHEN YOU GO?

Make sure that you always have a field guide you can trust, so you know you're identifying your plants correctly. In recent years, we've also had apps that can give you extremely precise results ("ObsIdentify" and "PlantNet" are two good ones). Be that as it may, I strongly recommend you carry a good field guide, too. Even though not all plants are dangerous, and even if you are absolutely certain of your identification, the golden rule remains: know what you forage and know what you eat.

Bring a bag or a basket for carrying your bounty; sometimes a jar comes in handy, too, especially when you're collecting seeds or berries. A small pocket-knife always comes in handy as well; you can use it to cut a plant free without damaging the root, or dig in the soil when you're looking for tubers. Every now and then, you might find yourself needing a magnifying glass, especially when you're looking for certain tiny flowers. But all the plants in this book can be identified with the naked eye.

FOUND AN EDIBLE PLANT?

Don't grab it yet! First ask yourself the following questions: am I allowed to forage here? Is this the right season for this plant? What part of the plant do I need? How much do I need? These questions will keep you from breaking the rules and taking more than necessary. Always leave behind all parts of the plant that you don't need. If you only need a few leaves, take those—and leave the rest of the plant to keep growing. Don't uproot a whole plant when that's not necessary, and leave all the earth (with its worms, mulch, etc.) behind in the forest or meadow where it belongs. Nature will thank you!

TIME TO GET BUSY IN THE KITCHEN?

When you get home, check the identification of everything you've found one more time. That goes double for things like umbellifers or wild garlic which are easy to mistake. Are you sure about what you've found? Then bon appétit.



THE RULES OF FORAGING

The rules associated with foraging are intended to serve two principles: on the one hand, respect for nature, and on the other, the local laws that everyone must always observe. Here I'm going to take a closer look at these fundamental rules.

LOCAL LAWS AND KNOWLEDGE

Follow the local rules and know what you're foraging. Make sure that you're not picking any legally protected or locally threatened species. This means informing yourself! Protected plants are found on the local "red list" of protected plants (see the links at the end of this section). Only collect what you know, and only eat it when you are 100% sure you know! That's also because some toxic plants look very similar to edible ones.

RESPECT FOR NATURE

When you forage, only take what you need. Beginning foragers in particular tend, out of enthusiasm for their newfound pursuit, to take more than that. Always leave enough behind. That's in the interests of both the plant species and the other animals and insects in the environment. Try to assess how much you're really going to be able to use yourself. At Forest To Plate, we consider nature our second home, so in nature we always behave like we're a guest in a friend's home. Don't disturb the environment, don't break any stems or branches, don't stray from the path if you don't have to, never walk through any unusual vegetation, and don't disturb any animals.

Whatever plant species you're collecting, never take all of them: Always leave enough behind so that it stays in the environment in an amount that will allow it to grow back. Don't dig plants up; only take a few leaves or flowers per plant. That's how to ensure that the plant will always be there. After all, you want to be able to come back next year and find it again, don't you?

SAFE ENVIRONMENT AND USE

Always collect your wild ingredients from clean places. Anything you collect from bushes and shrubs, you're best advised to pluck from knee height or higher. That's because there are dogs and foxes out there that like shrubs too—but for different reasons. Ever heard of the fox tapeworm? It's a parasite

that can be found in fox droppings. The chance of you getting infected by it is small, but better safe than sorry: just pluck from higher than these animals can reach. You also need to be aware of environmental contamination and human-generated pollution. Stay away from industrial sites and railway lines. Even then, always clean the plants you collect. If it works for your culinary plan, the best thing to do is to heat, cook, or blanch everything well, which will kill the undesired bacteria and parasites. But if you intend to use a plant raw, then rinse it well and spray it with a little vinegar, too.

Also be alert for tick bites: with our gradually warming climate, there's more of them every summer and they stay around longer. So take care when you're wandering through forests or long grass. Particularly in the summer, these tiny parasites love to hide in the warm places on our bodies, such as armpits, backs of the knees, and groin area. Some ticks carry Lyme disease, so it's a good idea to do a body check after any hike.

FORAGING: GENERAL GUIDELINES

Foraging laws and customs vary widely across countries and regions. Always check and follow local regulations before collecting wild plants or fungi.

PROTECTED AREAS

Foraging is often prohibited in nature reserves, national parks, and protected habitats. In some cases, special permits may be required.

PERSONAL VS. COMMERCIAL USE

Small-scale foraging for personal use is commonly tolerated in many regions, but commercial harvesting is frequently restricted or prohibited.

PRIVATE PROPERTY

You may only forage on private land with the permission of the landowner.

PUBLIC LAND

In some places, limited foraging is allowed along roadsides or in non-protected public areas, though restrictions may apply.

SUSTAINABLE HARVESTING

Wild plants and fungi are vital to ecosystems. Harvest responsibly, take only what you need, and avoid damaging habitats.



A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a bunch of bright green, leafy plants, possibly wild garlic, over a shallow stream. The water is clear and rippling, with some rocks visible beneath the surface. The background is softly blurred, showing more of the stream and surrounding greenery.

/02

PLANTS & HOW TO USE THEM

the foraging book

*The plants I discuss in this book are found
in temperate climates in the
Northern Hemisphere.*

TANSY

Tanacetum vulgare



DUTCH: BOERENWORMKRUID

FRENCH: TANAISIE COMMUNE

GERMAN: RAINFARN / WURMKRAUT

FAMILY: DAISY FAMILY (*ASTERACEAE*)

Also in this family: chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*), common mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*).

DESCRIPTION

1. Perennial.
 2. Grows to a height of 1.2 m.
 3. Blooms from June to October.
 4. Its many yellow flowerheads are visually striking.
 5. Leaves are irregular, with deep serrations, like small fronds.
 6. Stalk is angular and dark brown.
-

EDIBLE PARTS

Flower and leaf are edible (in small quantities).

CONSTITUENT COMPOUNDS

Bitter substances and essential oils, including thujone, which is toxic in large amounts.

WHERE TO FIND IT

Tansy is extremely common; it's also known by the names "bitter buttons" or "cow bitter." It is often found along verges along roads, field margins, and unmanaged areas. It is a very dominant plant; if present in an area it will generally outcompete other plants, which is why it is often found in large numbers.

TASTE

Tansy is pleasantly pungent and tastes bitter, with a flavour akin to camphor. Rubbing or bruising the leaves or flowers will release the strong, musky odour.

GENERAL

In the kitchen, it's best to use tansy in small amounts, because the plant does contain toxic essential oils like thujone. Pregnant women are advised not to consume it at all.

Although toxic in large amounts (so large as to make any dish inedible due to overpowering bitterness), this plant has been used both medicinally and culinarily for thousands of years.

Long widespread throughout the temperate climates of Europe and Asia, in the eighteenth century the plant also found its way to North America.

IN THE KITCHEN

When they are young, and thus fresh and not yet too deeply aromatic, the young leaves are sometimes used in soups. You can also add them to an early spring salad. The flowers are a nice addition to baked goods, but the leaves are the easiest part of the plant to use. Thanks to their aroma, they lend themselves perfectly for flavouring liqueurs or spirits such as gin. The Botanist Gin, a very popular gin brand that flavours its product with wild plants, uses tansy abundantly, which the distillery harvests on the island of Islay in Scotland.

I once sat on the jury for a cocktail competition held by The Botanist Gin, and one contestant had dried tansy, then burned it and captured the smoke in the cocktail glass, giving it a very aromatic flavour of its own.

Here in Belgium, in the town of Diest, a traditional pancake known as “*Diesterse kruidkoek*” is still made in spring, as it has been for hundreds of years, with young tansy plants.

Elsewhere in the region, the plant is still occasionally used in pancakes, and in the local dialect it is also called “*pannekoekekrut*” (“pancake herb”).

MISCELLANEOUS

Tansy is known for being an insect repellent, and it has also been used to control intestinal worms in chickens. This is because of its essential oils, which are actually toxic.

Although tansy is not used in the kitchen much these days, it is a plant with a rich cultural history. It was, for example, a known “witchcraft herb” in the middle ages, used to keep witches and ghosts away. The name of the plant in Flemish, “*boerenwormkruid*” (“farmer’s worm herb”), indicates that it was known to expel worms in livestock. It was also used to induce miscarriages.

You will even find the plant mentioned in Greek mythology: Ganymedes became immortal thanks to this plant, after he had caught Zeus’ eye. The Greek word for immortal is “*athanasia*”, and that is said to be where the name of the plant is derived from. The reason for this association is that the plant’s yellow flowerheads bloom and keep their vibrant colour until very late in the year.



LOOKALIKES

Common yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), when young, looks very similar to tansy and is also edible. The difference lies in the smell; tansy is far more aromatic. Also, the flowers of common yarrow are light pink to white, while those of tansy are always vibrant yellow.



Tansy-smoked gin

Seen in a cocktail competition held by The Botanist Gin, which uses tansy as one of its botanicals.

INGREDIENTS

dried tansy
gin

PREPARATION

Burn the dried tansy.

Place your glass, upside-down, on top of the burning herbs so the glass captures the smoke.

Turn over the glass and immediately pour in the gin and serve. The smoky tansy aroma stays with you as you sip — an exquisite drinking experience.





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If this book has inspired you to some foraging fever, check out our courses and workshops on www.foresttoplate.com! We offer a variety of activities, an accessible online learning package, and an intensive study programme with us in the Ardennes in Belgium.

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