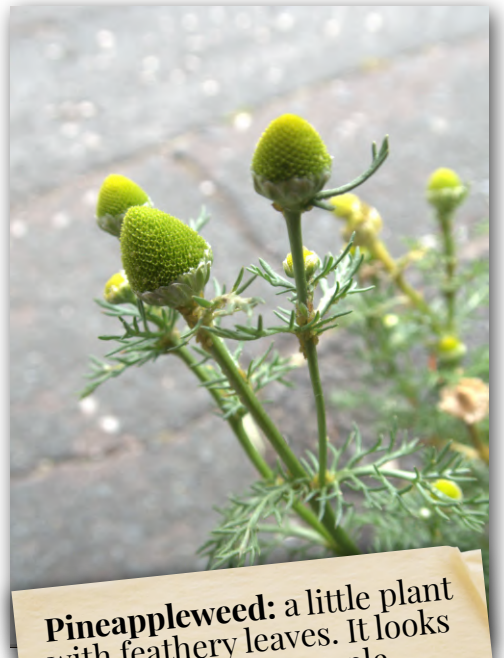
Photos: Leanne Dempsey



Four foraging experts tell us about finding edible plants in the city and how it reconnects us with the urban landscape.

Forgotten FLAVOURS



Pineappleweed: a little plant with feathery leaves. It looks and smells of pineapple.



Ribwort Plantain: Julie Bruton-Seal of Hedgerow Medicine prefers Plantains (Plantago sp) over Docks for soothing insect bites.

Fifty metres from a city bus stop, it's there. A little plant, less than 20cm tall, next to a post. Pineappleweed. It is in exactly the type of habitat that John Rensten, of Forage London, said it would be: in a scruffy patch of earth. Almost in the tarmac itself.
"It's such a fun thing to introduce to foragers," says John. "It looks, smells, and tastes like a pineapple. You can make granita, or infuse it in vodka." A tropical flavour - all from a tiny plant in a British city. Of course, this plant by a busy road is not the best one to pick for consumption. It is one of the first steps in the foraging journey: learning what a plant looks like and where to find it. It's these tiny patches of green near our streets and stops which John believes are a good place for beginners to start learning about edible plants.

"If you are looking at a bit of land next to your bus stop, you don't need to make a special journey to get there," says John. "There's this bizarre misconception that the countryside is clean and the city is dirty." But, John explains, when moving from learning to picking edible plants, he recommends people start in their local park, avoiding pollutants. "The idea of foraging in a city is normal - once you make it so."

For beginners and experts alike, finding edible plants is a treasure hunt. It invites us to dispense with the endless distractions of modern life and start noticing things we never knew were there. Once we do notice something, Lisa Cutcliffe, of Edulis Wild Food, has a few tips. "Never munch on a hunch. Also, never trust an app to eat something."

Identification apps, like iNaturalist, Plantnet, Flora Incognita, and Obsidentify, compare your photograph of a plant to their database of photographs, and suggest the closest match(es). They are getting more accurate, but foraging instructors like Lisa warn against using them to identify a plant for consumption. Apps may provide a starting point - a plant family to look and learn in a wildflower guide. Lisa encourages beginners to look for guides from reputable publishing houses written by authors with experience, thus avoiding books with AI-generated descriptions. “Get foraging books, but also get field guides,” advises Lisa. “The edibles and ‘deadibles’ are in foraging guides, but you need field guides too because you need to know more about others in the habitat.” For example, she says that a foraging guide might have only one edible Orange Milkcap mushroom, giving a false impression that it is easy to find, but a field guide reveals there are several non-edible Orange Milkcaps too. The Association of Foragers' directory can also help identify expert authors and instructors.

If you have already found a plant, a wildflower guide focuses on helping you identify it, with information on appearance and typical habitat. Where foraging remains in many mainland European cultures, many UK inhabitants fear wild foods in case everything has a poisonous lookalike. Only when looking through a field guide of our entire flora does it unfold a different picture. Some edible plants do have poisonous lookalikes, such as the Carrot family, which includes Wild Carrot and Celery alongside toxic Hemlock Water-Dropwort.

Photos: Leanne Dempsey

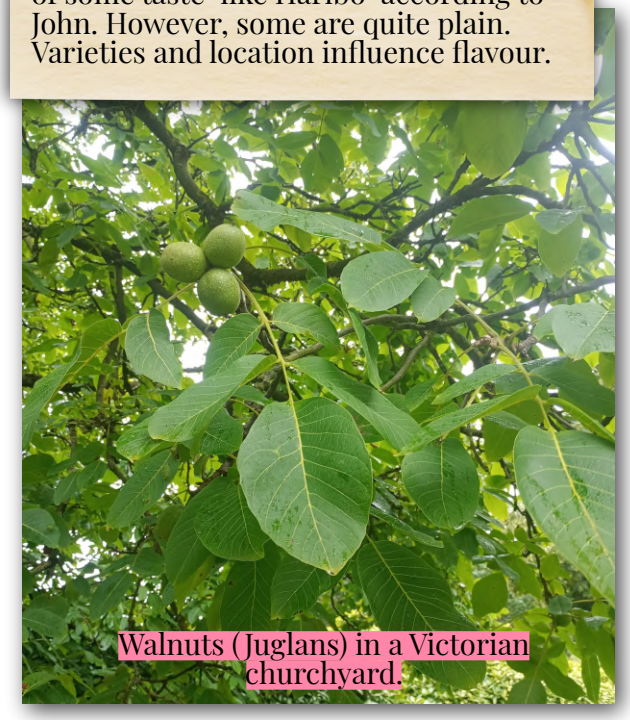


Lisa and John recommend **Rosehips** (above). John cooks and strains them twice through muslin, (to remove the hairs), before freezing the puree. **Wild Rose** species have edible hips (fruit) which, Lisa explains, vary in taste.

"There's this bizarre misconception that the countryside is clean and the city is dirty." - John Rensten, Forage London



Crab Apples (above) are planted in some cities. Sliced and dehydrated, the fruits of some taste "like Haribo" according to John. However, some are quite plain. Varieties and location influence flavour.



Walnuts (Juglans) in a Victorian churchyard.



Photo: J and M Bruton-Seal

Elderberry Syrup

By Julie and Matthew Bruton-Seal

Harvesting Elderberries
Pick bunches of elderberries when they are ripe and black but still firm and shiny. The easiest way to strip them from their stems is to use a fork.

Making the Syrup
Put ripe elderberries into a large saucepan with half their volume of water. Simmer and stir for 20 minutes. Allow to cool, then squeeze out the juice using a jelly bag or fruit press.

Measure the juice, and for every 500ml of juice, add 250g muscovado sugar, a stick of cinnamon, a few cloves, and a few lemon slices. Simmer for 20 minutes, then strain and pour while hot into sterilised bottles.

Dose: Take 1 teaspoonful neat every few hours for colds and 'flu, or use it as a cordial and add boiling water to taste for a hot drink.



Elderflowers

Photo: Leanne Dempsey

Nevertheless, there are plenty of edible leaves and flowers with nothing else looking remotely like them. There are also plant families with lookalikes, but they are all edible too.
Expert foraging books explain if a plant is edible, inedible, or poisonous. They also describe which parts of a plant you can eat, and how to make it ready for consumption. Lisa considers it unusual for a plant to have edibility straight away – they might need cooking or preserving to extract or enhance flavour.

Julie and Matthew Bruton-Seal, of Hedgerow Medicine, encourage people to look again at well-known edibles. For example, if blackberries are not yet ready, Julie recommends trying the leaves, citing them as good for a herbal tea. Elderflowers are also popular for cordials, yet where the berries are prized in Europe, Julie says less British people seem to think of picking them.

They have both spent years uncovering the historic uses of the wild plants that still grow quietly in many of our urban parks and hedgerows. Their book Wayside Medicine focuses on some of those plants, once used by our communities for medicine, but since forgotten.

"There's a lot of overlap between foraging and medicine," Julie, who trained as a herbalist, explains. "Nearly all leaves, if non-toxic, are wound-healing." Knowledge of these local edible plants and their locations would have been important in times before affordable modern medicines. It is incredible that our ancestors used certain leaves accurately, even though they had no means to test their properties. Those historic demands for leaf medicine may have impacted their current locations.

For example, according to Julie and Matthew, Roman armies carried Yarrow for healing wounds. Yarrow is still sometimes found around ancient military establishments like medieval castles. Parks that were once large estates with kitchen gardens could also have self-seeded herbs nearby.

City parks can yield surprising finds. In Leeds, Lisa finds a city's history can give clues about edible plant habitats. The city's areas of industrial heritage may have less greenery, but where parks grew out of former stately homes, diversity is on offer.
“Lots of parks in Leeds have old tree collections - planted as ornamentals but many are edible,” says Lisa.
“You can get huge diversity in a city because of those plants planted from the Victorian plant-hunting era.”
In parks, look out for Walnut, Magnolia, or lines of Limes (Tilia sp) blossoming. One of John’s parkland recommendations is Black Mulberry (Morus nigra). He cannot fail to pick Black Mulberry fruits without juice everywhere and hands "looking like Lady Macbeth.” According to John, some parks even have helpful tree identity labels.

As Julie and Matthew teach hedgerow medicine, we cannot miss out this incredible habitat, which Julie describes as "a very British thing, the hedgerow. We’re lucky to have them. They’re highly biodiverse habitats because they are an edge.
A linear wood.” Choices of hedge plants change according to their era: old lanes might have Hawthorn and Blackthorn, while a modern housing estate could be encircled by prickly Japanese Roses (Rosa rugosa), full of hips and flowers.

Spring and autumn are peak times for many wild edible plants, while summer is more uncertain. Lisa and Julie both use the phrase "hungry gap" to describe summer foraging in their areas of Leeds and Norfolk respectively. Dry summers can send salad plants to seed, while berries are on a spectrum of availability depending on location and weather.



Photo: Leanne Dempsey

Nettles: Picking them only before they flower, Lisa likes to dehydrate nettles and add the powder to cakes.

"Lots of parks in Leeds have old tree collections - planted as ornamentals but many are edible."
Lisa Cutcliffe, Edulis Wild Food



Photo: Leanne Dempsey

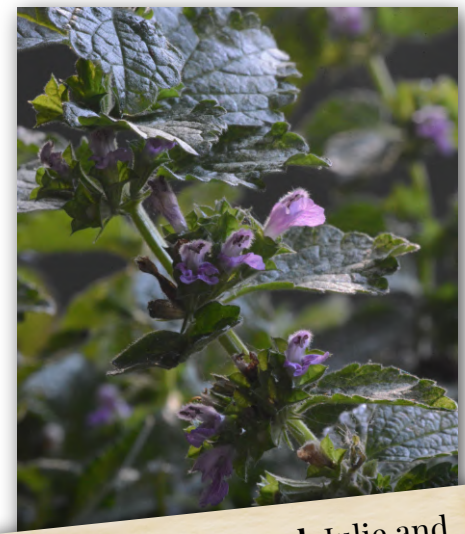


Photo: J and M Bruton-Seal

Black Horehound: Julie and Matthew consider this plant from the mint family as effective against bacteria.

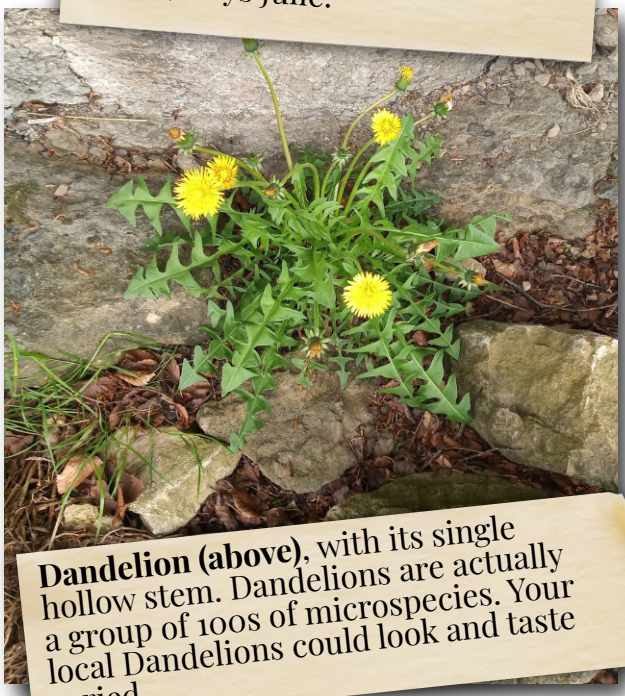
Photos: Leanne Dempsey



Blackberries: fewer people know the leaves make good herbal tea, explain Julie and Matthew Bruton-Seal.



Yarrow (above): The Roman army used to have cartloads (of it) - it is medicinally one of the most useful plants," says Julie.



Dandelion (above), with its single hollow stem. Dandelions are actually a group of 100s of microspecies. Your local Dandelions could look and taste varied.

"Nearly all leaves, if non-toxic, are wound-healing." Julie Bruton-Seal, Hedgerow Medicine.

However, this isn't about foraging for your entire dinner (though some foragers do just that in the Wildbiome Project, returning this autumn 2026). We are so used to year-round availability of foods that it's a new experience to search a city for a berry and wait for its arrival, sometimes eating it before other foragers elsewhere even in our own city.

Waiting for a plant to develop is also a great way to boost our plant knowledge. For John, there's value in returning to the same plant, such as a tree on a local street corner. "You see something. 'Oh, I don't know what that is!' ...and then you come back a few weeks later and it's got plums on it." This emulates his book, The Edible City: A Year of Wild Food, documenting edible plants month by month. Once you have got to know a few plants in your nearest green space, you could venture out a little. "If elderflower has gone over in central London, 6 miles out it is still flowering." John calls this gentle venturing "moving around in a hunter-gatherer style".

Finding edible plants takes time. It requires patience, rewarding us with local flavours and history we never knew. Lisa finds it a wonderful way to interact with nature: "Pick a leaf here and there. It's mindful slow gathering."

John Rensten's book and courses are on **foragelondon.co.uk**

Julie and Matthew Bruton-Seal's books and courses are on their website **hedgerowmedicine.com**

Lisa Cutcliffe's website is **eduliswildfood.co.uk**