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# RAMPS, FIDDLEHEADS, SPARGLE & HOUBYS

A walk in the woods in the Heartland's early spring is intrinsically rewarding, but while you are enjoying those first few sunny days after a nourishing spring rain, why not look for things that can feed your belly as well as your soul? The woodlands of the upper Midwest are teeming with gourmet goodies in the spring, and this abundance is there for the taking, if you just know where to look.

Gathering wild foods is probably the most sustainable, and certainly the most ancient way to provide delicious and nourishing food for your family. It dates back to before the dawn of our species, and continues to this day (how's that for sustainable?). Archeologists have uncovered the remains of a 6,000 year-old man, and in the pouch found with him were several mushrooms. The arrow in his back may have indicated that he was foraging in someone else's territory. Such severe penalties are less likely today, but it is still a good idea to make sure you have the landowner's permission.

Although today our innate instinct to gather has been redirected toward grocery stores and shopping malls, it is still there just as surely as it was with the "Mushroom Man." Sadly the tools and tricks our ancestors used to find wild edibles have been replaced by knowing which coupons to clip and which grocery has the best deal on frozen pizza. It need not be so, and learning a little bit about the Heartland's easiest-to-find spring delicacies is the best place to start.

The first to sprout through the damp forest floor is likely to be ramps. Otherwise known as wild leeks (*Allium tricoccum*), these relatives of onions, garlic and shallots inspire weekend-long festivals in the Appalachians, where their flavor is much stronger—some might say overwhelming. Here in the Midwest they are milder—much easier to appreciate—and prolific. They are picked in early April when they have two or three leaves, or sometimes they are left until summer and then only the bulbs are used. They can be eaten fresh, pickled, sautéed or grilled, and a fine julienne of the young leaves makes an excellent salad garnish.

Next to arrive on the local scene is the fiddlehead. Named for its resemblance to the top end of a violin, fiddleheads are the early shoots of the ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*). They are perhaps the least known of the common wild edibles in the area—perhaps because of the inexhaustible supply of deer, which tend to have an easier time finding them than we mere humans. As with the ramp, they are best when they are young and wound in a tight coil. Soak them thoroughly in cold, salted water for 10-20 minutes, then rinse and sauté them in butter, with garlic and parsley (add some ramps, too!)

Similar in flavor but not at all related to the fiddleheads is the next on the springtime wild food hit parade, asparagus. Many descendants of German and Bohemian immigrants to the Central US still call it by its German name, "spargle" (pronounced "schpar-

gle). *Asparagus officinalis* is of course farmed all over the world, but is one of those foods, like tomatoes, where it is so superior in season (April-June) that it renders its cultivated cousins unrecognizable. Wild asparagus can be found almost anywhere, particularly in ditches along country roadsides. It too should be picked young, and is best tossed with a little olive oil, salt, pepper and any blend of fresh herbs you like, then quickly grilled. Even those who have said they don't like asparagus have enjoyed it this way.

The Truffle of the Heartland, the King of the Midwest Woods, the mushroom that put the "fun" in "fungus" is the wildly popular—and just as elusive—Morel (*Morchella esculenta*). Of course it should always be emphasized that you should have some expertise when hunting mushrooms because if you're not dead certain, you might be just plain dead, so consult experts such as those at the Prairie State Mushroom Club ([www.geocities.com/iowa-fungi](http://www.geocities.com/iowa-fungi)) before you taste anything.

The Bohemians in the Czech Village section of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, still call morels by their old-country name, "houby" (pronounced "hoby") and have a festival in its honor every year in the middle of May. At that latitude, the houbys are usually sprouting by Mother's day, so the Czech and Slovak Museum there sponsors the festival the weekend after. Another good way to know if the morels are up is to look in the woods for the May apples, or what some kids call "umbrella plants." When these five-point-leaf plants are about knee-high, it's morel season in your neck of the woods. Look for them near recently dead elm or other hardwood trees.

Theresa Marrone starts looking when the lilacs are in bloom. Her book, *Abundantly Wild: Collecting and Cooking Wild Edibles in the Upper Midwest*, (published by Northern Trail Press and available at their website, [www.NorthernTrailsPress.com](http://www.NorthernTrailsPress.com)), reveals all the secrets to finding all these and 70 other wild edibles of the region, complete with recipes like fiddlehead pie, asparagus with garlic grits, and morel pizza.

So now that the days are a little longer, and a little warmer, why not plan a trek through the woods? You'll get some great exercise, and you can find some wholesome goodness along the way.

