

'Good Old Things': The Transformation of Wild Herbs from Common Sustenance to Aristocratic Luxury in Early Modern England

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ABSTRACT: During the early modern period in England, wild herbs were indistinguishable from vegetables. They were gathered from the nearby fields and hedge groves for daily pottages. The strong, bitter flavours of these wild herbs seemed to define the lives of the poor who ate them. While the upper-class did eat wild herbs on occasion, or used them to season foods, in general they were less interested in commonly found weeds than they were in exotic spices from far away and herbs primarily occupied the realm of medicine. But as botany became a fashion of the upper-class, and land-use changes associated with enclosure made these wild herbs less abundant, they became a trendy element in elite cuisines.

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During the early modern period in England, wild herbs were indistinguishable from vegetables. They were gathered from the nearby fields, woods, and hedgerows for daily pottages. Since the majority of people still lived near wild landscapes, it was common practice to make a meal with what was free-growing and easily at hand: plantain and mallow, dock and nettles, ivy-leaved toadflax, skirret, succory, hyssop, watercresses, the buds of elders, clary and alexanders, sorrel, savory, borage, bugloss, purslane and chervil, pea shoots, samphire, scurvy grass, beach mustard and arrow grass. One hundred herbs to add to the pudding. But by the dawn of the Enlightenment period, wild herbs began gracing the tables of the wealthiest gourmards. The transformation from common greenstuff to elevated ingredient dovetails with the rise in botany. Motivated both by scientific curiosity and a desire to bring long forgotten flavours back to the table, botanist searched out new plant specimens to study, often relying on the poor country women who intimately held this knowledge from their own use of wild herbs in the kitchen.

In the early 16th century, wild herbs were such a common element of the average person's diet, and considered a standard part of peasant-tradition, that they were rarely mentioned in much detail or with any special concern. It is possible that upper-class households also found free-growing herbs to add to their meals, but menus and cookery books rarely mention greenstuff, much less any distinguishing between 'wild' and 'cultivated' plants. Another difficulty in understanding the role of herbs in Early Modern diets is that some authors interchanged the words 'vegetable' and 'herbs'.

In fact, most descriptions of herbs were found in medical herbals printed for pharmacological, rather than culinary, uses. In the previous centuries, many monasteries had extensive medicinal gardens. Monks produced numerous herbal manuscripts by hand, many of which were based on texts first created in classical antiquity, such as the *De Materia Medica*, a five-volume encyclopedia about herbal medicine written in the first century by the Greek physician Dioscorides. But until the printing press was developed, these handmade books remained rare and inaccessible to the ordinary person. Most herbal knowledge was therefore kept alive as folk medicine, handed down from mother to daughter.

With the invention of the printing press in the fourteenth century, a great number of books could be easily produced and ancient herbals became more accessible than ever before. Theophrastus's *Enquiry into Plants (Historia Plantarum)*, written sometime between 350 BC and 287 BC, was first translated into Latin in 1483 and is one of the earliest examples of an attempt at systemic biological classification. It describes plant structure, reproduction, growth habits, and carefully distinguishes between plants found in the woods, growing wild, or as cultivated crops.

The fuzzy distinction between wild herbs as foodstuff or as medicine is in part because of the prevalence of humoral theories of health, which derived from ideas dating back to classical Greece and China and gained prominence in the Medieval Period. The Universe was believed to be made of four elements that needed balancing within the body. Eating certain foods was a way to change the balance of these humours. Intertwined with these beliefs was that of the Doctrine of Signatures, which first appeared in Western thought with the ancient Greeks and Romans. It was believed that every being bore some mark of God, whether hidden or invisible, and with this indication, one could discern where they fit within God's natural hierarchy. According to the idea of the Great Chain of Being, plants and animals were linked in a vertical chain, the value and placement of each species directly related to the identifying marks found within their signatures. Plants with common emblems – their shapes and colours, habits and locations – were more related. These signs were a gift from God, such that we might know the natural order and allowing mankind to discover Nature's curative powers: it was a mirror to our infirmities.

According to this kind of sympathetic medicine, the medicinal power of herbs was not inherent in their buds and leaves, but lay in their complementary resemblance to human needs and desires. If a flower looked like an eye, it could treat eye infections. If the petals were triangular or flesh-coloured, like the human heart, the plant would remedy ailments ranging from chest-pains to heartbreaks. The roots of the plant mandrake resembled a miniature person, and like a spirit double, was believed to hold the power of anesthetics. It was also a cure for sterility and the collapse of passion. Needless to say, it became extremely sought after, leading to widespread poaching, fraud and counterfeiting – perhaps the first example of the black-market trade in wild products.

Not only did nature fit within God's hierarchy, but social class did as well, and therefore appropriate diets also mirrored a natural hierarchy. Bulbs and roots were considered the lowest because they grew directly in the soil, whereas fruit growing on the tops of trees was more noble in character. Birds were at the top of the animal kingdom and this high position suggested they were a more appropriate food for the higher classes of society. The further food was from the earth, the more delicious it was meant to taste.

As the Renaissance progressed, there was increasing interest in herbal texts from the classical period. Herbals were translated and published in the vernacular languages, rather than Latin as was common among treaties of other types of knowledge at the time, so that they might be more generally accessible. By the sixteenth century, knowledge of flowering plants had greatly increased but their study was still tinged with magic and superstition. As a result, the accuracy of the information in herbals varied. For instance, *The grete herbal*, published in 1526, contained a series of woodcut images derived from illustrations made in the previous century. Many of the same woodcuts were repeated for entirely different plants, with little relevance to their descriptions. The visuals thus functioned primarily as decoration.

But as interest in anatomy and medical drawings increased, some authors went to great efforts to depict plants with a similarly high degree of accuracy. In Leonard Fuch's herbal *De Historia Stirpium Commentarii Insignes* (*Notable Commentaries on the History of Plants*), first published in Switzerland in 1543, and known as the 'New Herbal' in the English version, he describes 400 wild plants first identified in ancient texts. The illustrations were drawn in nature by the botanical illustrator Albrecht Meyer, then cut into wood by a master engraver. The level of attention to detail meant that noble men could use the book for plant identification. Pietro Duodo, an Italian Renaissance diplomat, included this book in his gentleman's traveling library, a collection of 90 works in 133 volumes which he hoped would be a portable source of information, encompassing all the knowledge available at the time.

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Around this time, William Turner published the first part of his *New herbal, wherein are conteyned the names of herbes* (1551), with beautiful woodcuts, primarily copied from Fuch's book. The treatise was published in three parts beginning through the second half of the sixteenth century. As one of the first systematic surveys of England's plants, it became a touchpoint for the transition of herbal knowledge away from its association with magic, superstition and religion and into the realm of the scientific.

Perhaps most interesting to our understanding of the culinary uses of wild herbs was that Turner's book includes the 'vertues of every herbe'¹ and the location of local plants. This combined with it being written in English rather than Latin meant that what had once been in the domain of apothecaries was now more accessible to the general population. He identifies modern names and plants from classical herbal descriptions such as those found in Pliny and Dioscorides, and delineates between wild and cultivated varieties. For example, 'Wild mynte...looketh more whitish than the garden mynte doth, and it hath a very strong

savour.²² Wild mint was considered ‘hotter and drier’ under humoral definitions, so was not recommended for the diverse culinary and medicinal purposes that garden mint could be used for. However, the leaves could be powdered for an anti-poison.

Turner was not the only writer to pointed out that wild herbs were of much stronger flavor than their domesticated counter parts. The botanist John Parkinson (1567-1650), who began his career in a London apothecary, became the apothecary to James the I and eventually the Royal Botanist to Charles I – and thus straddled this shift from herbalism to science – was particularly interested in delineating herbs that were of use in kitchens. His motivations appeared to be more in service to expanding general knowledge of plants rather than strictly culinary: he makes note of kitchen uses ‘very sparingly’ as he does not desire to write ‘a treatise of cookery, but briefly to give a touch thereof.’³ He describes the Dutch and Flemish immigrants tradition of using strongly flavoured herbs, such as tarragon and chervil, and that French immigrants liked salad herbs with a stronger flavour than the English.

It is in these kinds of early botanical descriptions that we begin to see a picture of the use of wild plants as foodstuffs by poor citizens, practices which had likely been occurring for centuries but wasn’t of concern until it became relevant to the domains of science. People regularly gathered wild leeks, Clove gillyflowers, annual mercury, chickweed, the leaves of ground elder, cresses, burnet, skirret and the leaves of wild strawberries, violets and primroses, moss and colewort, nosesmart, peppergrass, pea shoots, cowslip and goatsbeard, buttercup, yarrow and rampions, rye-grass, pennyroyal, and smooth hawksbeard. The strong, bitter flavours of these wild herbs seemed to define the lives of the poor who ate them as a matter of survival. But given how nutrient-dense and flavourful wild herbs are, in some instances, the poor likely enjoyed superior meals to the rich.

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As botany became increasingly in vogue for upper-class couture naturalists, there was a frenzy of plant collecting, a sort of friendly competition between quasi-professionals to see who could seek out the most interesting wild plants to bring into potherb gardens for cultivation and study. These ardent plant collectors, finding exotic potherbs in other countries or out in the wilds of their own backyards, developed into a network of wealthy men who traded specimens with each other for their own trials and eventual published treatises. Botanists were further elevated if they discovered a new wild plant that could be added to the dinner table, even if that herb had been known to the poorer classes for centuries.

As they went out to the hedgerows and woods looking for rare edible curiosities, it was clearly motivated by a foodie sensibility. Parkison was enamoured with the sweet parsley in the Italian ambassadors London garden. He writes about ‘those that take delight in eating of herbs,’²⁴ and describes plant collectors as ‘those whose curiosity searcheth out the whole work of nature to satisfy their desires.’²⁵ Indeed one of the arguments against deforesting Bernwood Forest in Buckinghamshire during James I reign came from the University of Oxford, which adamantly feared it would destroy the wild herbs growing there, which were considered to be its ‘blessed commodities.’²⁶

Indeed, flavour and culinary usage was very intertwined with these botanical studies. As botanists began to more systematically describe plants in the mid-17th century, edible wild herbs were prevalent in their studies. On occasion, some botanists even indulged in eating the specimens they were collecting! The famed William Coles suggests that ‘if you have forgotten a cucumber on your picnic then pick wild salad burnet,’⁷ a wild herb that looks like parsley and has the subtle taste of cucumber. Coles spent much of his time in the fields watching country people gather herbs, and would then add these to his plant identification schematics. He described how and where many edible wild plants grew including purslane, nettle tops, watercresses, ‘black potherb’ (alexanders or black lovage), and the buds of alders. It is evident that he enjoyed his time with country folk, observing their practices, and genuinely admired their use of foraged foods. ‘There is not a day passeth over our heads but we have need of one thing or other that groweth within their circumference,’ he wrote admirably. Indeed, food seemed to require such wild-sourced herbs to have any flavor. He continues, ‘We cannot make so much as a little good pottage without herbs, which give an admirable relish and make them wholesome for our bodies.’⁸

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As in previous centuries, herbs – and particularly wild herbs with their more potent flavours – held both culinary and medicinal properties, characteristics which were not considered separate. William Langham, in his *Garden of Health* (1579) writes about hundreds of plants – from wild caraway to cotton weede to fleawort – detailing both their medicinal and culinary uses. Cole writes about nettles as both a delicious food and a blood purifier. Purslane and sorrel were both cleansing and anti-scorbutic. The use of a still became increasingly popular in upper class manor houses, for the creation of herbal oils and essences, for both medicinal and culinary purposes. John Partridge detailed precise instructions on how to gather wild herbs for the still in *Treasures of Hidden Secrets* (first printed in 1573, and then re-printed over the next 75 years). Do not wash them, he admonished, just wipe them dry. In 1640, Lord Howard of North paid his brewer to put herbs in his beer. Robert May, in his cookbook *The accomplisht cook* has a recipe for Metheglin, a flavored mead, with ‘field herbs’ such as wild thyme, mint, rosemary, fennil, angelica, wild time, hysop, burnet, agrimony.⁹ In another for a broth against consumption, he recommends ‘Violet leaves, wild tansie, succory-roots, large mace, raisins, and damask prunes boil’d with a chicken and a crust of bread.’¹⁰ Other broths required ‘sweet herbs’ or herbal possets made up of some combination of balm, borrage, endive, tamarisk, harts-horn, yellow sanders, blessed thistle, burage, savory, pennyroyal, fumitory, or marigold flowers. Other required ‘cool herbs’ such as violet leaves, strawberry leaves, and bugloss.

It was also a period of experimentation in cuisine, especially for vegetables, as more and more exotic varieties were brought home to England from the colonies and medieval superstitions about the unsavoury and dangerous quality of vegetables disappeared. Fresh wild herbs became a staple of both upper class and middle class cookbooks and party menus.

Linnaeus describes the ‘sweetish, with a slight aromatic, warm pungency’¹¹ of *Eringium* leaves (likely sea holly) for salads, and it was the fashionable to comfit the roots. Samphire growing along the seacoasts (Sir William Petre at Ingatestone in Essex liked it pickled), wintercress in the cold months, young purslane gathered along country paths in spring (the Countess of Kent was a fan), and water houseleek pulled from the fens. Sorrel, chervil, and parsley in soups and sauces, the acidity paring well with fatty meats. Pigweed was used as a potherb and the stems were pickled in salt and vinegar for use in winter salads. Broom buds were pickled too.

In salads, wild herbs abounded. Sow-thistle, wild hyssop, and jack by the hedges (*Alliaria*) to add flavourings to salads. Sir Kenelm Digby ate borage and bugloss, sorrel and chervil. Gerard Markham was fond of succory and the leaves of wild violets. John Evelyn wrote an entire treatise on salad called *Acetarua: A Discourse of Sallets*, citing numerous wild herbs as ingredients. Robert May has recipes for ‘grand sallets’ requiring ‘knots of buds of sallet herbs, buds of pot-herbs, or any green herbs, as sage, mint, balm, burnet, violet-leaves, red coleworts streaked of divers fine colours, lettice, any flowers.’¹² Edible flowers were a vital element at any fancy dinner. The blossoms of borage, bellflowers, rampions, marigolds, hopbuds, violets, lily flowers, alexander buds, lavender, primroses, cowslips, rose, hawthorn and peony were used for flavour and colour. Clove gully flowers preserved in sugar and vinegar were served in winter salads.

The loss of flavour that occurred when these plants were grown in gardens was generally accepted for the convenience, but it was agreed that if a chef wanted stronger flavours it would be found out in the wild. Wild mustard grew all over much of the country and was particularly celebrated in Tewkesbury and Wakefield.¹³ May has a recipe for a flavouring cake that could be taken with you for use anytime: mustard mixed with honey, cinnamon, and vinegar, then dried in the sun.

Towards the end of the Enlightenment period, with plant schematics and classification firmly established, and medicine increasingly moving away from strictly herbal cures, wild herbs began to occupy a realm of nostalgia, just before they were forgotten. Land-use changes associated with enclosure, and legislation that encouraged farmers not to let their fields go fallow, were making it increasingly difficult for poor people to source local wild herbs. The government was promoting the cultivation of cereal production, in part to free up labour for the Industrial Revolution, and the general population was urged to eat more grains, rice, peas, and root vegetables – particularly those with high proteins as a substitute for meat. Theophilus Lobb, in his 1763 book, *Primitive Cookery*, recommends the poor eat cardoons – a kind of thistle and the wild version of the globe artichoke – fried and buttered, as they could be found abundantly in ditches and hedges. For botanists, the focus was less on uses of plants and much more on totalizing systems for organization. Their treatises contained less and less mention of the virtues of wild plants in either culinary or

medicinal uses, although in 1783, Charles Bryant, in tried to combine the two areas in his *Flora Dietetica: Or History Of Esculent Plants, Both Domestic And Foreign* and describes milk thistle (lady's thistle) as one of the best wild edibles. But generally for the upper class, gardening inventions extended growing seasons and new exotic vegetables and herbal varieties combined with improvements in crop breeding meant reliance and interest on local herbs was a quickly fading fashion.

We are today experiencing a resurgent interest in foraging for wild herbs. At the same time, we are facing a frightening global wild plant extinction: we have lost nearly 600 species in the past 250 years. Understanding the history of our relationship to wild herbs – how they have been associated with both poverty and luxury – is necessary if we are to stem the tide of loss. Perhaps reviving a taste for these diverse wild herb species will spur us to conserve the landscapes in which they are sourced. That the taste of the wild will reconnect us to the common nourishment we have forgotten.

Notes

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10. Ibid, pg 742
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