

# The Backpacker's Guide to Edible Wild Plants

This is the beginning of a regular feature on edible and medicinal uses of wild plants

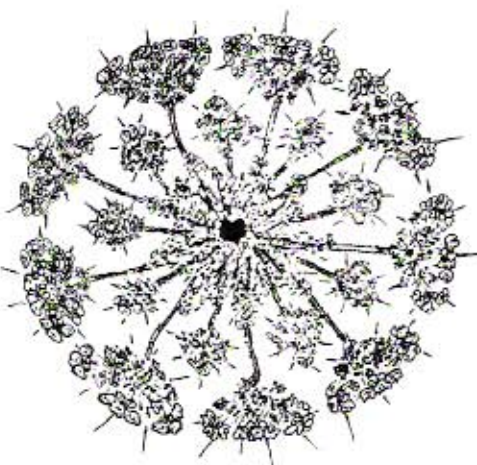
by Frank Garret

There are so many useful wild plants that everyone should be familiar with the uses of at least a few species. Armed with accurate information and a little imagination, the backpacker is capable of expanding his trail diet to include an almost endless variety of nutritious, easily prepared food based entirely or in part upon wild plants. In addition to the culinary possibilities, many wild plants can be used very effectively for their medicinal properties. This series will supply you with the information necessary to get you started, but you have to supply the imagination and initiative.

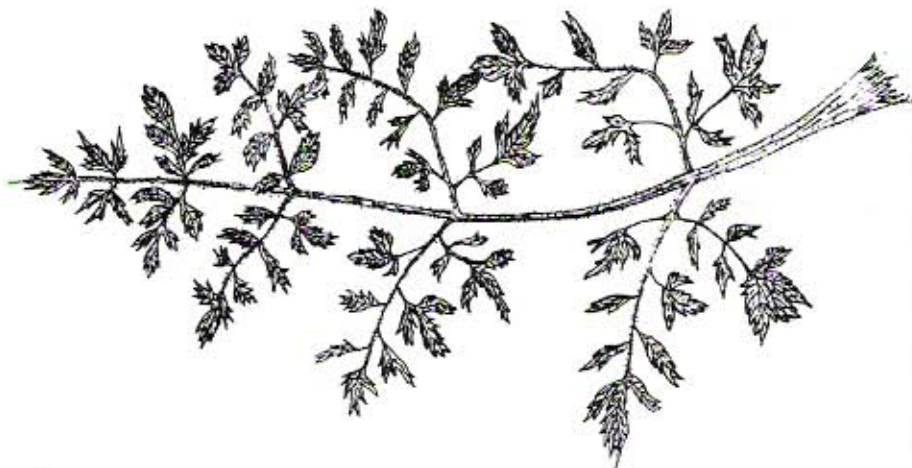
## QUEEN ANNE'S LACE or WILD CARROT (*Caucus Carota*)

This is a delightful little plant which is easily recognized and should be familiar to everyone. The species is the same as the cultivated garden carrot and so is the flavor. The wild carrot is a biennial producing a slender, white root and carrot-like leaves the first year. The second-year carrot produces new leaves and a tall, stout, branched stem upon which the flowers are borne. The individual flowers are minute but are borne upon many radially aligned stems at the terminal end of the flowering stalk and form a large, flat umbel which appears to be a single gigantic flower several inches across. The flowers composing the umbel are creamy white in color, but the single flower at the center of the umbel may be pink, red or very dark purple. There is no possible way for this plant to be confused with any other related plants, some of which are poisonous. The unmistakable odor of carrots is detectable in every part of the plant.

The wild carrot is versatile. Almost every part of the plant may be



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eaten, and there must be at least two dozen excellent recipes using its various parts. I will begin at the bottom and work up. The root of the first-year carrot is far too small to be worth collecting unless you are on the verge of starvation and even then you would be hard put to collect enough. By the time the second-year carrot has formed its new leaves, the root has grown to a length of four or more inches and can be as fat as your thumb. These roots can be collected by digging or by cutting a small circle several inches deep around the root and pulling the root out with its accompanying plug of soil which is easily knocked off. (I do not recommend that you use your favorite knife

Mount Washington four miles away recorded winds of up to 59 miles per hour that day and an effective wind-chill factor of 65 degrees below zero.

The two lessons: first, the vent of our tent had been covered by new snow, and this had caused frost to form inside; second, we should have put our boots inside our sleeping bags to keep them warm.

Continuing along the range that day was out of the question. The next 15 miles of our route were above treeline, completely exposed to the winds. We decided not to move camp since the spruce protected it from the wind. These trees were stunted but strong freaks whose branches grow on only one side of the trunks and conform to the prevailing winds. Maintaining this base camp, we could climb Mount Madison to the east and Mount Adams to the southwest.

Visibility was poor, and following the trail cairns to the summit of Madison was difficult. Hoar frost built up by the wind coated the rocks in beautiful shapes. As we neared the top the weather worsened, and on the summit we became engulfed in a thick cloud. We decided to try to wait out the weather to get a better view. We dug caves in the deep hard snow between boulders just under the summit block where we took refuge from 50 miles per hour gusts. But after only a half-hour of inactivity our feet got cold, and we headed back to our camp in the spruce trees.

Back on the saddle we explored frozen Star Lake and marveled at the lifelessness winter brought to the area. At dusk we crawled back into our tents and feasted on steaming shrimp creole. Delicious. And after hot chocolate we went to sleep.

The morning of the thirteenth was crystal clear. Tom and I crawled out of our tents to photograph the sunrise and were stunned by the intensity of the cold. Our hands were numbed when we removed our woolen mittens to operate our cameras. Rewarming ourselves in the tent, we agreed that it would be foolhardy to attempt the entire Presidential Range in such severe temperatures and winds. We decided to spend the day climbing Mount Adams and make our retreat the following day. We melted ice for drinking water and wrapped it inside some clothes to keep it from freezing. We put on everything available to

keep us warm: wool caps and balaclavas topped with down hoods, fishnet underwear, wool shirts, sweaters, down pants and parkas, and two pairs of socks and mittens. Once out of the spruce and onto the bare flank of Mount Adams, the wind was stronger than we had yet experienced. The cold was so severe that we considered postponing even this short climb. But after a quick discussion in the lee of a boulder, we decided we were as well prepared as we needed to be, so continued. The powerful winds made climbing across the icy rock difficult even with crampons and ice axes. Names like Hillary and Whittaker kept coming to mind. My respect for these men grew as I realized that they not only had endured winds and temperatures like the ones we were experiencing but also had additional high altitude problems to contend with when they climbed Everest—29,028 feet compared to our 5,800 feet. Our feet got cold despite our strenuous climbing. At times we were blown off balance by the gales. The Mount Washington summit observatory reported winds of up to 80 miles per hour and a temperature of 12 degrees below that day. The wind chill factor was 80 degrees below. The views were breathtaking, -but- photographing them was an ordeal. I had to shoot with heavy woolen mittens to avoid frostbite. The lens filter continually iced up, and the batteries went dead from the cold, rendering the light meter useless. Fortunately, the rest of the camera performed flawlessly. With my experienced calculation of exposure, I got some pretty good shots.

Near the top we entered a blizzard and stuck close together as we climbed. At last, the summit. We had to hold on to rocks to maintain our balance. Standing on the summit cairn was almost impossible. Our toes were numb. We tried not to think about them because nothing could be done for them until we got back to camp. Every few minutes the summit cloud parted, revealing stunning views of a blizzard raging on Mount Washington, four miles south. We would have liked to stay longer, but concern for our feet suggested an immediate return to camp. We hadn't gone far when one of my crampons broke, and I had to take off my mittens to fix it. My fingers stuck to the metal,

and my hands went numb. I returned my hands to the mittens and decided to continue with only a half-crampon on the left foot. As we stumbled into the spruces near our camp, there were fresh lynx tracks in the snow. In our tents we tried to thaw our frostbitten toes, but they remained numb.

During the night the wind increased, and the temperature dropped. The tents sounded as if they would blow away; none of us slept. Although we were wearing all our clothes inside our sleeping bags, we could not get warm. Our bags had become damp from cooking and the moisture of our breath—a very perilous condition. The temperature in the tents dropped to minus 25 degrees. We waited for morning, huddling together for warmth.

Dawn came with a slow brightening of the skies. The mountains to the north were pink. Our feet were still numb, and our boots frozen solid. We thawed them as best we could with our stoves and proceeded to break camp. Tom took off his mittens to untie the tents, and his mittens froze so solid he was unable to get his hands back into them. He decided to keep his hands inside his parka.

We chose the exposed Durand Ridge as our descent route because of the views. When we reached the ridge we found ourselves exposed to winds stronger than those that had buffeted us on the summit of Mount Adams. The observatory on Mount Washington recorded winds of 105 miles per hour that day, a temperature of 27 degrees below zero and a wind-chill factor 90 degrees below zero. I was thrown to the ground a number of times. One of Tom's wrists was exposed to the wind and frostbitten.

It was too uncomfortable to enjoy the views. We stumbled down the ridge. Finally we reached treeline, and the woods seemed more friendly. The temperature rose as we dropped farther down off the ridge. We switched from crampons to snowshoes. As we hiked toward the highway I remembered the comet. There had not really been any opportunities to photograph it and we'd gotten too heavily involved in the weather and what it was doing to us to think about comets. But I didn't care. We had climbed in some conditions we would remember for the rest of our lives. 🐾

for this task as it is hard on knives, but I have a number of utility knives which I use for this and other tough jobs.)

The roots can be washed, scraped, sliced very thinly and used raw by themselves or added to other food. If eaten raw, they must be sliced very thinly or you will not be able to chew up the tough core in the center. The roots may also be cooked whole or sliced in boiling water for 20 minutes or until tender. Roots to be cooked need not be sliced as thinly as those used raw, but some care must still be taken or the core will be inedible. Whole cooked roots must be peeled, and some of the cores will be tender enough to eat. Many freeze-dried trail dinners I have tasted were made almost palatable by the addition of wild carrots, or by the carrots served as a side dish. An excellent drink can be made by simmering a tablespoon of the chopped root in a pint of water for five minutes. By roasting the roots in a shallow pan until they are crisp and brown a much heartier and more flavorful beverage can be made.

Wild carrots are not as sweet as garden carrots, but my favorite recipe compensates for this fact. I call it Glazed Campfire Carrots. Boil one cup thinly sliced wild carrots in salted water until tender. Drain and add one teaspoon of butter-flavored oil and one to two teaspoons of honey. Cook, stirring constantly, until the carrots are well glazed and the sauce is hot and bubbly. Eat quickly while hot because if you don't, someone else will.

The leaves of the wild carrot are also edible. Their flavor is quite good, but their texture could best be described as "rough." When chopped, the cooked leaves make an excellent addition to freeze-dried trail dinners which may be somewhat lacking in texture. To cook the leaves, simply drop them into boiling water. When the water comes back to boil, drain and serve or chop and add to something else. I like to season my carrot greens with soy sauce, but any seasoning is acceptable. A drink made from the leaves in a manner similar to that made from the root has a much "greener" flavor, but is still quite good flavored with honey. If you are going to collect the roots, why not use the leaves too?

The flowers of the wild carrot are

perhaps the best part of this little plant. The flowers are so abundant and profuse that several days after collecting hundreds of flowers from a single patch of wild carrots, it is difficult to tell that any flowers have been collected at all. There is only one recipe which does the wild carrot flower justice, and that is Carrot Flower Tempura. Tempura is basically a thin batter into which something is dipped to be coated before it is cooked. An excellent tempura batter can be made from any number of instant pancake or biscuit mixes by adding increased liquid to the basic



*The carrot has a tall, stout, branched stem upon which flowers are borne.*

recipe. The particular product you use is not very important. Simply add powdered milk and water or just plain water to the basic recipe until the batter is thin and smooth. When you collect carrot flowers, be sure to cut or break them off leaving an inch or more of the stem for a handle. Dip each flower into the tempura batter until it is well coated. Fry in a hot,

well-oiled pan until golden brown on both sides. These fried flowers may be served at breakfast with honey, maple syrup or molasses, or at dinner with soy sauce. You will be surprised how many you can eat.

The abundant flowers of the wild carrot produce abundant seeds, yet another useful product from this plant. As the seeds mature on the flower head, the edges of the umbel curl in toward the center forming a cup-shaped structure in which the seeds are borne. The seeds may be harvested easily by crushing the seed head in the palm of the hand and catching the seeds in a container as they fall. Carrot Seed Tea is an excellent drink which can be made by simmering a tablespoon of crushed carrot seeds in a pint of water for five minutes. Sweetened with honey, this tasty tea is a warming, aromatic stimulant which will relieve heartburn and indigestion. A few crushed carrot seeds will go a long way to improve the flavor of soups, stews and freeze-dried trail dinners, but be sure to add them early as they require some cooking to bring out the flavor. What more could you ask from a lowly seed?

If you can smell, you can find the wild carrot, and if you can find it, why not use it? I recommend that you try at least one of these products from the wild carrot. It is well worth the effort.

While on an extended hike in West Virginia, some friends and I came upon a beautiful patch of wild carrots in full flower. We had been walking uphill in the rain for three days and had been unable to get a decent fire started to cook a hot meal. We immediately decided to take an extended rest, dry out our equipment and get some hot food into our starving bodies. During the next two days I prepared wild carrots in every conceivable way, much to the benefit of our trail-weary bones. Each new concoction was pronounced superior to the last. When we finally broke camp, there was not a wild carrot to be found. We had dug up most of them and had eaten the rest down to the ground. Upon returning to the same spot in subsequent years, I discovered that the wild carrots were thicker than ever. That patch of wild carrots on a hillside in West Virginia will always be something special to me. 🍷