

Edible Wild Plants of the Northeast

- greens, roots, and flowers -

Chickweeds – prostrate, thin-stemmed annuals; flowers small, white, with five deeply notched petals. **Common chickweed** (*Stellaria media*) (1) and **star chickweed** (*S. pubera*) (2) edible raw or steamed; **mouse-ear chickweed** (*Cerastium vulgatum*) (3) steamed. Available year-round, even in a winter thaw.

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) (4) – perennial; rosettes of sharply lobed leaves harvested in early spring, after first frost, or any time of year before flowers appear, in salads, steamed, or sautéed. Young flower buds when still at ground level cooked or pickled; mature flowers added to salads or fried in batter. Roots slowly roasted and ground for relaxing caffeine-free coffee substitute.

Chicory (*Cichorium intybus*) (5) – biennial; leaves dandelion-like, but hairy and with reddish midribs; rosettes of leaves harvested before stalk appears (eventually bearing blue flowers), steamed. Roots roasted and ground for coffee substitute.

Wild Lettuce (*Lactuca canadensis*) (6) – tall, leafy annual with numerous small dandelion-like flowers; sap milky, bitter. Leaves in basal rosette with long, pointed terminal lobes, edible both raw and steamed.

Wilk leek, ramp (*Allium tricoccum*) (7) – perennial; leaves broad, waxy, light-green; bulbs only slightly swollen. Leaves and bulbs steamed or sautéed, bulbs pickled. Caution: many poisonous lilies resemble onions, but none smell like onion or garlic. Gather far from well-traveled roads (ramp absorbs heavy metals).

Curly dock (*Rumex crispus*) (8) – perennial; leaves long, hairless, with wavy margins, often with red midribs, in rosettes in early spring, eaten raw in salads when very young; older basal and stalk leaves and peeled flower stalks steamed; flowers green, tiny; fruits hard, brown; taproots yellow, for detoxifying tea.

Sheep sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*) (9) Leaves soft-textured, long-stemmed, with two opposite narrow lobes adjacent to bases, in salads or cooked in sorrel soup; flowering stalk smooth, slender, with many tiny, reddish flowers; fruits inconspicuous, shiny, yellow-brown. Caution: contains oxalic acid – eat sheep sorrel sparingly, and avoid if you have kidney stones, rheumatism, or gout.

Ox-eye daisy (*Chrysanthemum leucanthemum*) (10) – biennial; flowers on second-year stalks with white petals and yellow central disks. Leaves smooth, narrow, dark green, irregularly lobed. Young leaves and flower buds added to salads.

Stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) (11) – annual with minute greenish flowers in axils of paired coarse, toothed leaves; entire plant covered with stinging hairs. Young shoots harvested (with gloves!), top leaves of plants (before they flower) stripped off from the top down, steamed or simmered in soup; dried leaves steeped for tea.

Dock (*Rumex spp.*) and **jewelweed** (*Impatiens spp.*) juice relieve nettle sting.

Lamb's quarters (*Chenopodium album*) (12) – annual in disturbed soil; flowers tiny, green; younger leaves narrow, coated with white powder, older leaves diamond-shaped and powdered underneath; added to salads or cooked (steam, sauté, or add to soups, stews, casseroles, quiches) or dehydrated by drying in the sun. Avoid plants growing in soil contaminated with nitrates or pollutants.

Amaranth (*Amaranthus retroflexus*) (13) – tall annuals with dense clusters of green flower and seed clusters; ovate leaves with wavy margins. Plants edible raw, steamed, sautéed, or simmered 15-20 minutes; rich in vitamins and minerals, containing twice the protein of most leafy vegetables. Avoid plants growing in overly rich, artificially fertilized, or polluted soil (see **lamb's quarters**, above).



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Disclaimer: This pamphlet is not intended as a substitute for a field guide in positively identifying plant species

- greens, roots, flowers, and seeds -

Common blue violet (*Viola papilionacea*) (1) – perennial; leaves in basal rosettes, stalked, shallow-toothed, heart-shaped, up to 5 inches across; tender young leaves in salads, older leaves steamed, sautéed, added to vegetable dishes; fresh leaves can be dried for future use. Flowers violet or blue, in salads or candied. *Caution: underground rhizomes are poisonous.*

Common plantain (*Plantago major*) (2) – perennials in lawns and well-trodden places; leaves broad, parallel-veined, in basal rosettes, on long, fibrous stalks; flowers tiny, greenish-white; seeds in tiny green or brown capsules. Young leaves eaten raw or cooked; mature leaves cooked and discarded and cooking water saved for vegetable stock with high carotene and calcium content. **Narrow-leaved plantain** (*P. lanceolata*) (not shown) emerges earlier in spring; smallest, youngest leaves used for spring tonic.

Purslane (*Portulacca oleracea*) (3) – reclining annual with tiny yellow five-petaled flowers. Stems reddish-green, smooth, succulent, breaded and added to casseroles or pickled; leaves fleshy, mucilaginous, toothless, stalkless, with sweet-sour flavor, in salads, cooked, used in soups as okra-like thickener. Seeds winnowed and used as cereal, in granola, as poppy seeds, or ground into flour.

Black Mustard (*Brassica nigra*) (4) – annual bearing terminal clusters of four-petaled yellow flowers. Lower leaves bristly, irregularly-lobed; upper leaves narrow, hairless, wavy-toothed. Leaves gathered in spring before plants flower, finely chopped and added sparingly to salads or steamed; flower buds gathered and prepared as broccoli; green seedpods pickled or in salads; seeds used as seasoning or finely ground and mixed with vinegar for mustard.

Shepherd's purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*) (5) – annual bearing spikes of four-petaled white flowers, seedpods heart-shaped. Leaves dandelion-like, clasping stems, added to salads or prepared like spinach before flowers appear; dried seedpods used as peppery seasoning.

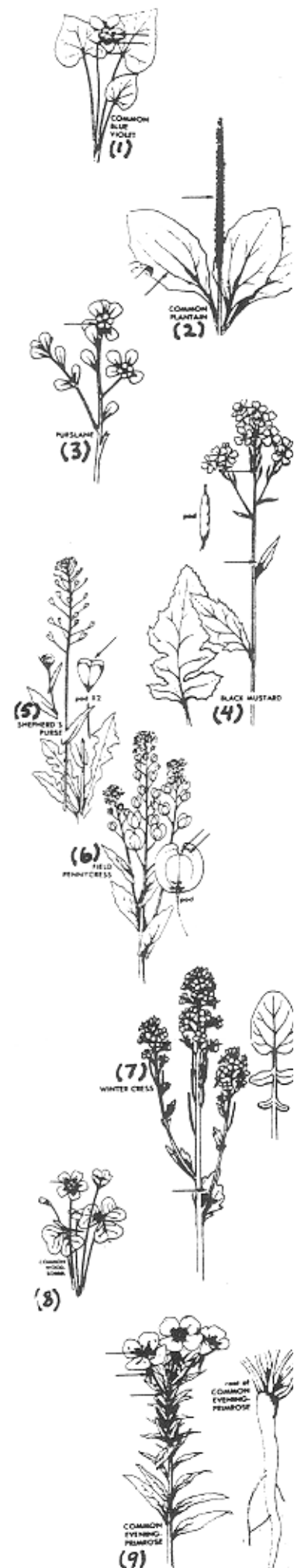
Field pennycress (*Thlaspi arvense*) (6) - similar to **shepherd's purse**, but seedpods are large, flat, circular, and deeply notched, and the basal leaves are toothed but not resembling dandelion leaves. Seedpods and leaves used as hot-tasting substitute for cayenne pepper.

Winter cress (*Barbarea vulgaris*) (7) – tall annual; basal rosette of dark green, toothless, hairless, deeply lobed leaves gathered from late fall to early spring, steamed; flowers four-petaled, yellow; buds prepared as broccoli.

Garlic mustard (*Alliaria officinalis*) (not pictured) – biennial (invasive alien), plants growing up to three feet, bearing small, white, four-petaled flowers; basal leaves dark green, heart-shaped, scallop-edged, deeply veined, long-stalked, up to five inches across, smelling of garlic when crushed, edible from late fall to early spring; stem leaves smaller and more triangular, less bitter than basal leaves, eaten in salads or briefly steamed, simmered, or sautéed. Flowers small, white, four-petaled; Young plants gathered in spring before true leaves emerge as sprouts for salads.

Wood sorrel, shamrock (*Oxalis spp.*) (8) – perennial; leaves with three heart-shaped leaflets folding along the midribs, sour-tasting; eaten raw in salads, added to soups, or steeped 10 minutes in hot water, then chilled; flowers five-petaled, violet or yellow. *Caution: contains oxalic acid - avoid if you have kidney stones, rheumatism, or gout.*

Common evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*) (9) – native biennial; leaves in basal rosette of first-year or second-year plants are hairy, long, elliptical to lance shaped, with prominently white or reddish midribs and raggedy edges; both leaves and roots smell and taste like peppers and radishes. Leaves steamed, simmered ten minutes in soups, chopped and added to vegetarian burgers, or dried, ground, and combined with other flours for pasta making or biscuits; roots gathered in fall of first year or early spring of second year, added to spicy dishes like curry or chili, used as soup thickener, or pickled.



- shoots, roots, and flowers -

Japanese knotweed (*Polygonatum cuspidatum*) – (1) perennial, invasive alien; tall, shrublike plant growing in dense stands; stems mottled green, dusted with white powder, hollow, bamboo-like, with enlarged joints encased in papery sheaths; leaves broadly ovate with pointed tips and squarish bases; flowers greenish white, profuse, in slender fingerlike clusters in leaf axils. Young shoots gathered when six to eight inches tall (or up to a foot tall and peeled) as rhubarb substitute.

Burdock (*Arctium spp.*) – biennials with pink or purple thistle-like flowers; **common burdock** (*A. minus*) (2) flowering stalk two to five feet tall with many globular sessile or short-stalked burs, **great burdock** (*A. lappa*) (not shown) two to nine feet tall with fewer and much larger burs in flat-topped clusters. First year taproots steamed, mixed into sauces, soups, chilis and curries, steamed and baked, or grated and sautéed in oil. Immature flower stalks gathered in late spring (before flowering) peeled, parboiled one minute, added to soups, stews and casseroles.

Pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) (3) – tall forking perennial, often growing in stands; leaves oval, untoothed, stalked, emerald green; flowers small, white, with green centers, growing on bright magenta terminal racemes; berries dark purple, indented, staining. *Entire plant is poisonous; young shoots 6 to 8 inches tall must be parboiled by plunging into boiling water, cooked for one minute, drained, and cooked another 18 minutes in boiling water to be edible (press against colander with spoon to remove excess water).* Seasoned with oil and vinegar or add to soups and stews; properly cooked shoots can be preserved by drying.

Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) (4) – thick-stemmed herb with bitter, white, sticky latex; leaves thick, velvety, toothless, elliptical, opposite, 4-9 inches long, downy underneath, tapering to a point at each end. Flower buds in loose heads, to 3 inches across; flowers purple-pink, five-parted, radially symmetrical. Sweet, opened flowers parboiled one minute, added to pancake batter for fritters or included in soups, stews, casseroles, and other vegetable dishes. *Flower buds and immature seedpods (to two inches long) must be boiled in two changes of water (see cooking instructions for pokeweed, above), as sap is mildly toxic.* Refrain from harvesting if this species is locally scarce, as monarch butterfly larvae feed exclusively on this species.

Cattails (*Typha spp.*) – wetland perennials; furry cigar-shaped seedheads overwinter on long, stout stalks in dense stands arising from rhizomes. **Common cattail** (*T. latifolia*) (5) has larger seedheads and leaves than **narrow-leaved cattail** (*T. angustifolia*) (6). Shoots of both species pulled off rhizomes in spring or summer and peeled; odorless, tender, white inner cores, tasting like zucchini and cucumber; added to salads, sandwiches, and stir-fries. Immature green male flower heads harvested in late spring, steamed or simmered for ten minutes, served with sauce, seasoned oil, or butter. Pollen from mature male heads shaken into bags (or the mature heads picked, allowing pollen to shed inside the bag) and sifted; used as flour in combination with other whole-grain flour (one part cattail pollen to three parts flour) in baking breads, muffins, pancakes, and waffles, or eaten raw, sprinkled on yogurt, fruit shakes, oatmeal, and salads.



- fruits and flowers -

Juneberry (*Amalanchier spp.*) (1) – shrubs or small trees; bark smooth to slightly furrowed, adorned with curving horizontal dark-gray stripes; leaves alternate, oval, finely toothed, two inches long; flowers white, ¾ inches across, with five long, strap-shaped petals, hanging in long, sparse clusters in early spring before leafing; berries round, with terminal crowns, red (sometimes ripening to blue-black), with almond-flavored seeds – used in muffins, cobblers, and jam.

Blueberries (*Vaccinium spp.*) (2) and **huckleberries** (*Gaylussacia spp.*) (not shown) – bushes, 1 ½ to 14 feet tall; leaves short-topped, elliptical, smooth or slightly toothed, 1-2 inches long; flowers bell-shaped with 4-5 fused petals, white sometimes tinged with pink, red, or green), to ¾ inches long, often on racemes, in spring; berries round, with five-pointed terminal crowns, blue or blue-black, many-seeded; eaten fresh, in baked goods, or blended in smoothies.

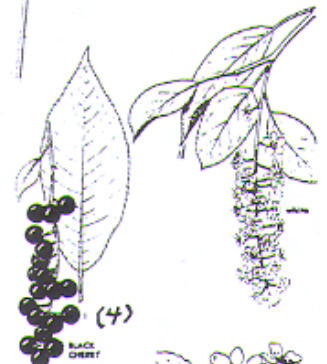
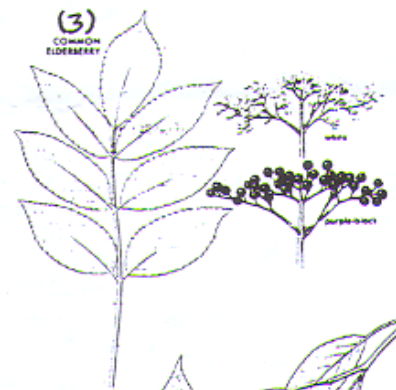
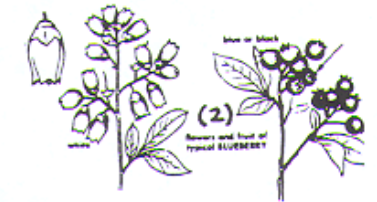
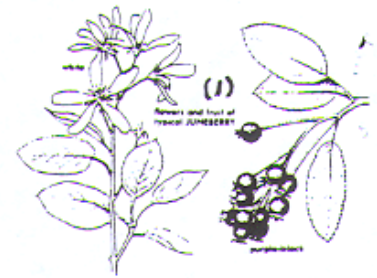
Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) (3) shrubs with compound leaves (5-11 coarsely toothed leaflets); branches with piths; flowers small, creamy, white, fragrant, in large umbrella-shaped clusters in mid-June picked for sautéing or fritters, shaken off stems and added to baked goods, or steeped in cold water for 24 hours for tea (lemon and honey added to taste); berries small, purplish-black or black, in drooping clusters, ripening in mid-August, used in baked goods or made into jelly.

Cherries (*Prunus spp.*) - small trees with twigs smelling of almonds when scratched, leaves alternate, long-oval, toothed, lighter underneath, midribs of undersides coated with rusty-colored hairs; flowers fragrant, five-petaled, white, in long clusters. **Black cherry** (*P. serotina*) (4) – fruits red at first, darkening to black, eaten raw, used for jelly, pureed for punch or fruit soup, or made into fruit leather. **Choke cherry** (*P. virginiana*) (not shown) with dark red or purplish red astringent fruits, cooked and sweetened with honey for jelly. *Caution: cherry leaves are poisonous.*

Raspberries and blackberries (*Rubus spp.*) (5) – brambles; arching canes to 10 feet long; flowers white, five-petaled, on racemes in late spring. **Black raspberry** canes have a whitish bloom (when rubbed off, stems are reddish); raspberries are almost perfectly globular and thimble-shaped (receptacle remains on stem when berry is picked), red at first, then black when ripe (in early summer). **Blackberry** thorns are larger and sharper, and the berries are more irregular in shape (picked in late summer). Both are eaten raw and used in shakes, pancakes, pies, puddings, and cobblers.

Wrinkled rose (*Rosa rugosa*) (6) – shrubs armed with recurved thorns; leaves dark green, feather-compound, with 5-9 small, toothed, oval leaflets; stems reddish-brown, sticky, hairy. Flowers large, with five narrow, spoon-shaped, white or rose-purple petals; used in salads and sandwiches (bitter white bases snapped off). Fruits (hips) large, sweet, fleshy, orange to red, with five terminal persistent sepals, eaten raw or cooked and strained for sauce or jelly, or for tea.

Fox grapes (*Vitis labrusca*) (7) and **river bank grapes** (*V. riparia*) (not shown) – high-climbing woody vines; tendrils forked, coiling. **Fox grape** leaves are smooth and deeply toothed, used as vegetable or for stuffing; grapes are small and quite tart. **River bank grape** leaves are wooly underneath; grapes large, sweet. Both species can be blended and used for fruit sauce, jam, jelly, or juice.



- fruits, nuts, and flowers -

Smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*) (1) and **staghorn sumac** (*R. typhina*) (2) – large shrubs usually growing in dense stands, to 30 feet tall; leaves feather-compound, 16-24 inches long, with 11-31 pointed leaflets turning red in the fall: berries hard, dry, red, in erect clusters. **Smooth sumac** has hairless stems and fruit and loose clusters of berries; **staghorn sumac** berries are hairy and grow in denser clusters. Berries of both species gathered from late August into fall, separated from stalks, soaked for five minutes, strained to make “sumacade”, or as substitute for lemon juice concentrate in recipes. Berry clusters can be stored at room temperature without spoiling.

Day-lily (*Heemerocallis fulva*) (3) – perennial with swordlike parallel-veined leaves and large, showy, 6-petaled orange and yellow flowers blooming only for a day. Flower buds and day-old blooms gathered and sliced for salads, hot-and-sour soup, or sautéed. Shoots harvested in early spring for salads or sautéed, steamed, stir-fried, baked, in soups, or pickled. Tubers are small, best gathered in fall or early spring when firm, sliced and added to salads or cooked 10-15 minutes in soups.

Caution: about one person in fifty experiences gastrointestinal stress when eating significant quantities of any day-lily plant part, so sample sparingly at first. Also, do not confuse with poisonous lilies or daffodils, which have bulbs.

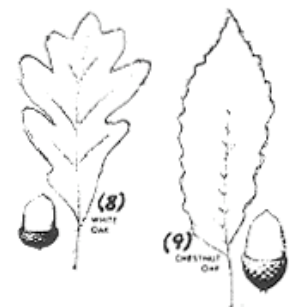
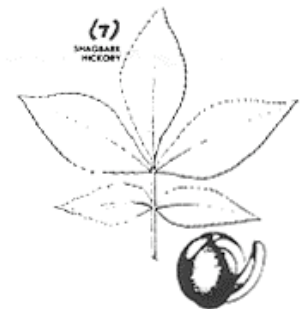
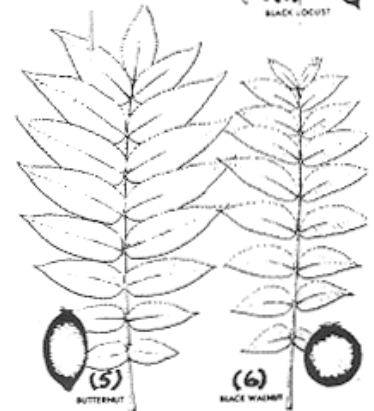
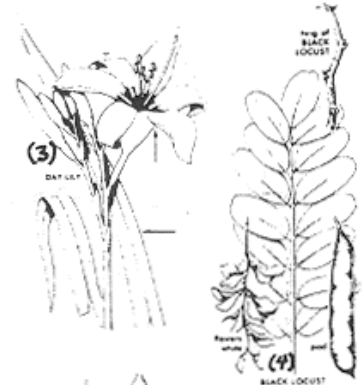
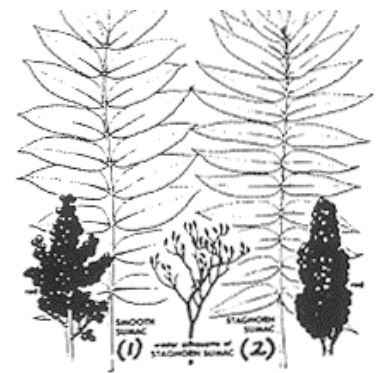
Black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) (4) – Trees to 80 feet; bark deeply furrowed, dark brown-gray; leaves bluish-green, compounded, protected by pairs of small spines; flowers white, fragrant, pea-like, gathered in mid-late spring for salads, soups, and fritters; seed pods black, flat, 2-6 inches long, containing 4-7 small, rounded, flat seeds. *Caution: leaves are poisonous.*

Butternut (*Juglans cinerea*) (5) – trees to 80 feet; bark gray, with shallow grooves and broad, wavy ridges; leaves compound, 15-30 inches long, with 7-19 paired, narrow, toothed leaflets and a single, terminal leaflet; male flowers hanging in slender catkins, short inconspicuous female flowers on branch tips in spring; fruits green, fragrant, fuzzy, sticky, 3 inches long; nuts deeply furrowed, dried with husks still attached; kernels eaten raw or in baked goods.

Black walnut (*Juglans nigra*) (6) – majestic trees, to 120 feet; bark ropy-looking, dark-brown, furrowed, with flattened ridges; leaves compound, 1-2 feet long, with 12-24 finely-toothed, lance-shaped, unevenly paired leaflets with asymmetrical bases, pale green above, downy beneath, lemon-scented; fruits spherical, green, lemon-scented, husks brown-staining (must be removed by crushing or rotting); nuts black, globular, irregularly furrowed, 1 ½ inches in diameter; must be dried before cracking (place inside burlap or cloth and use a vice or hammer), kernels fruitier than English walnuts and used in any recipe calling for walnuts.

Shagbark hickory (*Carya ovata*) (7) – Trees with peeling bark; leaves palmately compound, with five leaflets; nuts with light-tan shells enclosed in spherical four-parted husks splitting open at maturity; kernels eaten as is or in baked goods.

White oak (*Quercus alba*) (8) and **chestnut oak** (*Q. prinus*) (9) – large trees with alternate, simple, smoothly lobed leaves; acorns gathered in the fall, boiled in shells for a few minutes, then shelled; chopped or ground nuts boiled in several changes of water until the water no longer darkens and the bitterness is dispelled, eaten raw or in casseroles, soups, or stews, or ground into meal or flour mixed in equal parts with whole-grain flours in muffins, breads, and pancakes.



- poisonous plants and natural remedies -

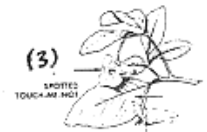
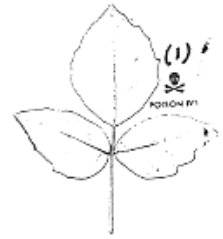
Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*, *Rhus radicans*) (1) – trailing or climbing vine or erect shrub (to seven feet); leaves long-stalked, 4-14 inches long, with three leaflets, highly variable (hairless or slightly hairy, glossy or dull, toothless or variously lobed). Climbing stems with short aerial rootlets. Berries small, hard, white, in drooping clusters. *Contact with any part, either living or dead, or with the fur of a pet that has been in contact, can result in severe dermatitis. Showering with soap and cold water or washing with jewelweed juice or sweetfern tea (see below) as soon as possible often prevents rashes; these herbal remedies can also hasten healing.*

Poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*) (2) – shrub or small tree in partly wooded swamps; leaves 6-12 inches long, with 7-13 pointed, toothless leaves; twigs and buds hairless; bark smooth, dark, speckled with dark spots; berries small, ivory-white, in spreading or drooping clusters. *Even more virulent than poison ivy; prevention and treatment of dermatitis same as above.*

Jewelweed, spotted touch-me-not (*Impatiens capensis*, *I. biflora*) and **pale touch-me-not** (*I. pallida*) (3) – annuals growing in wet places; stems succulent; leaves long-oval, with a few rounded teeth, unwettable; flowers trumpet-shaped, with curving nectariferous spurs, orange and red (**spotted touch-me-not**) or yellow (**pale touch-me-not**); seeds green, edible, ejected from exploding seedpods at maturity. Juice from crushed plants effective in preventing and healing **poison ivy** or **poison sumac** rash; also relieves fresh mosquito bites and bee and wasp stings and is helpful for warts, bruises, fungal skin infections, nettle stings, minor burns, cuts, eczema, acne, and sores.

Sweetfern (*Comptonia peregrina*) (4) – low deciduous bush in dry soil; leaves narrow, regularly lobed, strongly aromatic; fruits tiny, compact, bristly, aromatic. Tea made from leaves is a pleasant beverage, and is a highly effective prevention and remedy of **poison ivy** and **poison sumac** dermatitis (cool tea used as a wash).

Nightshade, bittersweet (*S. dulcamara*) (5) – weak woody-stemmed vines trailing over bushes; leaves usually have two small lobes at bases; flowers violet with beaklike, joined yellow anthers; berries oval, in drooping clusters, turning from green to orange to bright red, *fatally poisonous*.



Rules for Safe and Responsible Foraging

- Learn to recognize the common poisonous plants and plants causing dermatitis in your area.
- Absolutely identify plants before using them as food, using field guides to confirm their identity.
- Do not assume that plants that superficially resemble edible plants are themselves edible.
- When collecting an edible plant, be sure not to include parts from nearby poisonous plants.
- Be absolutely certain which parts of a plant should be collected and at what season, and the proper way to use them.
- Sample unfamiliar plants sparingly at first. If you are extremely sensitive to poison ivy, avoid sumacs, mangoes, and cashews.
- Do not assume that a plant is edible for humans if animals are observed eating it.
- Familiarize children with poisonous plants, and tell them not to put plants in their mouths; keep all plants away from infants.
- Do not collect plants that may have been sprayed with pesticides. Avoid roadside plants due to contamination from exhaust emissions.
- Some plants develop extremely dangerous fungal toxins. Do not eat any fruit that is starting to spoil or showing signs of mildew or fungus.
- Plants growing in contaminated water or in water containing *Giardia lamblia* and other parasites must be boiled or disinfected.
- Request permission before foraging on private property, and refrain from gathering rare species.

Tick repellants: tea tree oil, lavender oil, citronella, cedar oil, rose geranium oil, American pennyroyal oil, and eucalyptus oil.

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