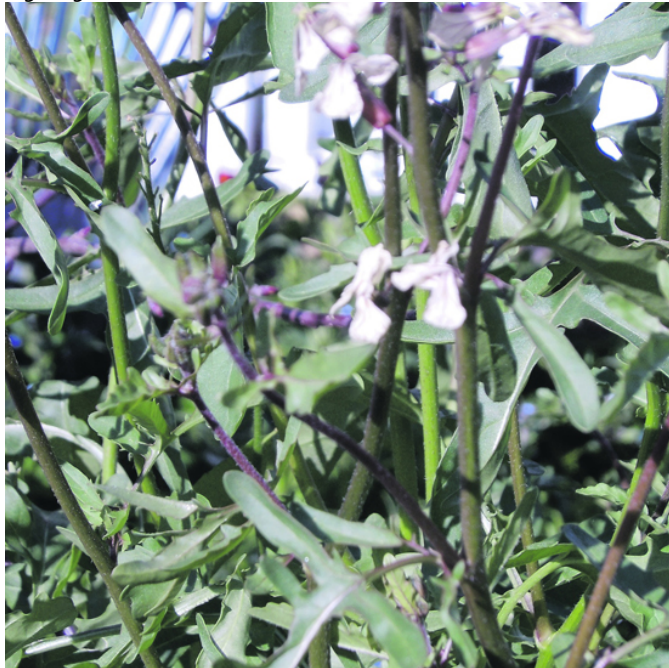


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Field of Greens Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian



Tender, spicy shoots of wild arugula....Cynthia's favorite forage. Photos Cynthia Brian

All winter long the Lamorinda hillsides struggled to shed their golden grasses as they thirsted for showers of life giving rain. Finally the precipitation carpeted the landscape in lush emeralds where grass seeds sprouted producing weeds that feed.

My husband believes that I was born to be a bunny. Not the curvy sirens published in the pages of men's magazines, but the hungry hares hopping over hillsides breakfasting in our backyards.

Yes, I confess. I eat weeds. I am a forager. Everyday I scour my property for edible flowers and leaves. I've never met a field of greens that I haven't snipped, sampled, and savored.

Both wild and propagated, I assure you that you, too, can fill your pantry with nutritious, delicious fresh herbs, lettuces, shoots, leaves, and vegetative discoveries if you take the time to get to know the genuine food of nature.

In my obsession to get you up, out, and gardening this year, I aim to introduce you to the scrumptious salad bowl of edible weeds awaiting your dressing.

First, a cautionary warning: Before eating an unknown plant, make sure to definitively identify it to be certain that it doesn't contain poisonous or irritant properties. Poison hemlock and wild carrot truly look alike, especially to the untrained eye. Hemlock killed Socrates and it can kill you.

With that proclamation, let's eat our lawns. As long as you haven't applied insecticides, pesticides, or non-organic fertilizers, your organic turf may be your ticket to a free feeding frenzy. Dandelions, chicory, chickweed, purslane, cresses, violets, and prickly lettuce are common specimens growing in Lamorinda backyards. Whether we want to admit it or not, a weed is merely a plant growing where we don't want it to grow. All of these "weeds" are actually cherished cultivars in other cultures. In Greece, on the island of Crete, the residents rank amongst the healthiest people in the world with zero heart disease, almost no dementia, cancers, or other diseases. Their diet consists of colossal amounts of foraged greens, which supply a maximum amount of vitamins and nutrients. The Mediterranean diet is healthy and effective because of the plentiful consumption of wild vegetation.

My current personal favorite is wild arugula. Both the leaves and the flowers provide a tasty, peppery flavor to my salads, sandwiches, and soups. I'm also a huge fan of wild garlic mustard with its sharp, pungent essence. Raw, steamed, sautéed, or stir-fried, these are great sources of calcium and iron. Whether it is sorrel, chives, thistle, calendula, or Miner's lettuce, the dietary content of wild greens is generally more nutritious than anything you can purchase at the supermarket. Depending on the specific greens, you'll ingest high concentrations of vitamin A, C, beta-carotene, zinc, manganese, fiber, and omega 3s.

Besides consuming my "rabbit chow," my garden supplies me with carrots, Swiss chard, cabbage, kale, leeks, lettuces, dill, fennel, parsley, spinach, onions, peas, beans, beets, and radishes. I'm sowing new varieties from Renee's Garden Seeds this season including tricolor pole beans, Oregon giant snow peas, wasabi arugula, jewel toned beets, specialty eggplants in an Asian trio, and, of course, butterfly and hummingbird garden favorites.

Discover these yummy edibles in your garden and instead of eradicating them, embrace them into your culinary creations. Whether you forage or cultivate, venture where the wild things are. (Don't harvest from roadsides, city streets, dumps, or places that could be contaminated, and always wash all gatherings.)

- Chickweed
- Chicory
- Dandelion
- Fennel
- Henbit
- Lamb's Quarter
- Milk Thistle
- Plantain
- Prickly Lettuce
- Purslane
- Sorrel
- Shepherd's Purse

Spring has sprung. Let the grass grow while you bunny hop to your own personal field of greens.

Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide for April

"Spring is the season for entering the fertile fields of life with seed, knowledge, commitment, and a determined effort." Jim Rohn

Over the mild winter, my vegetable garden was fabulously overtaken by feral foliage, many of which I've enjoyed as edible delicacies. Now that it is time to prepare the soil for my new seeds, I must edit judiciously. The poison hemlock and the pretty periwinkle will go, but the wild dandelions, arugula, mustard, calendulas, and miner's lettuce will remain until their life expires. As I listen to the croaking of the frogs mating in my pond during the night, I dream of my garden. With these first days of spring, my spirits soar as I dig my paws into the awakening earth. Aw, the renaissance of nature is within my grasp. Breathe in the energy and enthusiasm of new growth.

- CREATE a spring garden room to make your property more intimate and gorgeous by building or buying a pergola or arbor.
- ADD a mirror flanked by evergreens to a porch to enhance the space.
- IMPROVE your soil by digging in organic matter and humus.
- REMOVE deep-rooted weeds such as dandelions from your garden by hand. Eat them!
- DECREASE the spread of crabgrass by applying a pre-emergent that keeps seeds from germinating.
- PROTECT tender shoots from rascally rabbits and destructive deer with light-weight cloth covers until your plants are off to a strong start.
Old bed sheets work well.
- AERATE your lawn to improve the absorption of moisture and fertilizer before reseeding.
- PRUNE a few boughs of brilliant blue blooming rosemary for your kitchen vase. Enjoy the beauty, fragrance, and sprigs of gastronomic flavor.
- HARVEST the tender leaves of wild mustard, arugula, purslane, and dandelion. Add to salads and sandwiches for a surprising snap.
- REFRAIN from cutting back daffodils until they are as crisp as a cracker. They need to replenish the nutrients to the bulb for next year's floral explosion.
- SPRUCE up your home entry with spring in a basket! Buy four-inch pots of plants that accent your home colors to fill a rustic basket.
Add a top dressing of moss and don't forget to include tulips for that Easter ecstasy.
- KEEP picking up those dropped camellia blooms to deter petal blight.
- PLACE a vase of fresh flowers on your nightstand. Research indicates that individuals with the brightest outlooks and happiest attitudes keep blooms bed side.
- CONCEAL ugly chain link fences by planting fragrant sweet peas, scarlet runner beans, or morning glory climbers.
- MOVE plants on a cloudy day to new locations this month. Water thoroughly two hours before digging the entire root ball, plant in the new hole, water, and watch.
- FORAGE for wild greens for an adventurous fresh, nutrient rich salad.
- IDENTIFY mushrooms before using for culinary purposes. Never guess if you are not completely certain.
- CELEBRATE spring with floral, fresh, crisp wines from local agriculture. Visit <http://www.lamorindawinegrowers.com/>

lamorindawinegrowers.com/

- BUY homegrown heirloom plants including peppers, artichokes, eggplants, tomatoes, herbs and more at the Legacy Garden Farm in Moraga, 1370 Moraga Way, Moraga (between School Street where my office is and the Fire Department) on the weekends in April ending on Sunday, April 22.

- LIVE on the wild side at the Spring Wildflower Festival on April 14 in Sunol. www.ebparks.org or board the Wildflower

Train April 14 and 28 in Jamestown. www.railtown1897.org

- GET out, get going, get gardening. It's springtime in our backyards!

Celebrate Passover and Easter in a field of greens!

Happy Gardening to You!

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My virtual door is always open. I am available as a speaker and consultant. Feel free to contact me.

ASK CYNTHIA: Reader Requests

After perusing garden centers and the internet with no luck, Kelsey, a reader of The Lamorinda Weekly who enjoys Digging Deep, emailed me asking where she could find wild mustard seeds in bulk to plant on her hillside. Although they truly grow wild in our vineyards and on my personal property, I contacted my winery relatives in Napa Valley for a reliable resource on her behalf. Here you go Kelsey:

"For mustard seeds of several different varieties go to www.wilburellis.com . Click on the Agriculture link and put in your zip code for a location near you. Or contact Molly at the St. Helena, 975 Vintage Ave., St. Helena, CA 94574-0404 at 707-963-3495."

Another avid garden reader, Susan, contacted me about vetch as an over wintering cover crop she planted. Now that it is flowering, she wants to know if she can eat it.

"Although geese and goats gloat with adoration, if you have vetch as a nitrogen cover crop, don't be tempted to dine on it despite the fact that it resembles sweet peas. It is poisonous to single stomach creatures."



The word "dandelion" comes from the French "dent de lion" meaning lion's tooth because of its serrated leaves.



Lacy fennel with yellow fennel blossoms with forget-me-nots interspersed.



Blue periwinkle, also known as vinca minor, is not edible. It's a great ground cover.



Pick up any fallen camellias to avoid blight..



Cynthia's lop eared rabbit, Monet, wishes you a Happy Easter Bunny!



Cynthia Brian with columbine, foxglove, and other garden beauties.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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