

ETHICS OF FORAGING

Here are some tips for ethical foraging and wildcrafting
(sourced from learningherbs.com)

1. RESPECT YOUR LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

It is very important to know and understand what is abundant or what may be considered “at risk” in your particular area. Pick up a field guide for your region from your local library, bookstore, or online, and study up on regional flora. Pay special attention to identification characteristics, growing conditions, time of bloom/fruitletting. Seek out foraging walks given by professional foragers and herbalists and sign up for their next event. I find that local farmers, hunters, and fisherman are also outstanding resources for locating certain wild and abundant plant matter.

2. HAVE A FORAGING PLAN

Never set off into the woods (or anywhere else) without a proper plan. Keep in mind what you are looking for and where you should be looking for it, then stick to that mission. If you stumble upon something that interests you, note your location, take a picture or small sample, and consult identification materials and field guides when you have time and access. This practice will likely save you the trouble and potential danger of a misidentification, while also informing your decision as to if it is ethical to harvest (i.e. is it endangered or at risk?).

3. ONLY HARVEST FROM “CLEAN” AREAS

Forage in pollution, spray, and litter-free areas. Do not harvest from roadsides, city parks, along property lines, or in industrial areas – all places for potential pollutants and contaminants. It is best to find untouched or lightly traveled (on foot) areas for your foraging, where you can be assured that harvest is clean and safe for consumption.

4. IDENTIFY, IDENTIFY, IDENTIFY

I simply cannot stress this enough: learn to accurately identify your herbs and mushrooms. Never rely on one single characteristic like bloom or leaf for identification. Use three or more points of ID. Consider color, leaf, bloom, stem, fruit, bark/branches, fragrance, location, life cycle of the plant, soil conditions, and/or spore print (for mushrooms). For example, cottonwood trees produce a resinous, fragrant leaf buds in late winter/early spring, usually near waterways or in damp, sometimes boggy soils, on brittle, knobby branches. Here we have identified cottonwood by its location, its life cycle stage (leaf bud), its fragrance, and its branches – four points of identification.

5. BE CONSERVATIVE IN YOUR HARVEST

Most ethical foragers recommend that you only harvest a between one-tenth to one-third of any particular patch of what you see, and never from the only patch you find. For instance, every summer I pass a small patch of mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) along my favorite forest path – it is small, sparse and the only mugwort in the immediate area, so I refrain from harvest. Also, consider the life cycle of the plant. For example, snipping an elder tree of all those lovely white blossoms in spring will mean no berries come fall. Only harvest what you truly need. Exercising restraint is sometimes difficult, but a key trait of an ethical forager.

6. LEAVE NATURE AS GOOD AS OR BETTER THAN YOU FOUND IT

Nothing is more frustrating as an outdoor enthusiast than seeing your favorite spots spoiled, pillaged, and ransacked by less appreciative people. Remove all your garbage, and consider carrying an extra bag with you to clean up messes and litter you stumble across. DO NOT drastically alter the landscape for your own ends – don’t chop down trees/limbs, don’t pull downed trees across streams for bridges, don’t drive off road, don’t disturb nests, dens, etc. Just don’t.

7. PREPARE AND INFORM

Be prepared with the equipment you will need and the clothing you should wear, and always let somebody else know where you are headed and how long you expect to be gone. I carry a lightweight “parachute” type material cross-body bag that has a deep front pocket to hold my clippers, a couple of field guides, and smaller zip closure type bags, while the body of the bag offers plenty of room for my finds. A basket may be a good choice for fluffier harvest like nettle leaf, mushrooms, and flowers/petals. Wear sturdy, weather appropriate shoes, and when at all possible, long sleeves. A good pair of protective, heavy duty gloves are always a good idea.

8. CHECK OUT THE LEGALITIES OF YOUR AREA

An ethical forager is also a legal forager. Check out the laws and regulations in your area about where it is legal to gather plants and mushrooms, and if any permits are required to do so. Do not trespass. Always obtain permission before foraging on private property. If you are unclear about legal areas to forage, here again, your favorite hunter friend or relative can be a great resource for learning about public lands open for foraging and hunting and they may even know private property owners to whom you can seek permission for access. On that note – also be aware of hunting season schedules and take property safety measures during those times of the year. Keeping these few considerations in mind will help you to have a fun, safe, and legal foraging experience. Education, proper planning, and restraint are key characteristics of the ethical forager. Foraging fulfills some basic, primitive urges, provides exercise and activity in an increasingly inactive time, and brings us closer to truly appreciating the world around us.