

Foraging Revival

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Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

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Figure 1: Morel mushroom

Some sources claim that homo sapiens have existed for 300,000 years, but it's only in the last 10,000 that we've mastered the art of domesticating plants and animals. Prior to that, sustenance and survival were dependent on what could be found by foraging, that is, searching for wild food resources.

Foraging, also known as hunting and gathering, seemed to have been a lost art until the Covid-19 pandemic hit. As people tried to socially distance themselves outdoors, become more aware of their surroundings, and contemplate their fragile food network, foraging began experiencing a renaissance. Months later, many are now more "in tune" with their primitive side as they practice the skills that our ancestors mastered.

While early Europeans were still adjusting to obtaining food in North America, Native Americans were "living off the land." In the Chesapeake Bay watershed, several tribes harvested wild rice, which still grows

abundantly along various waterways. Others ate American lotus roots (tubers) like we eat potatoes today, and also roasted the seeds or ground them into flour.



*Figure 2: Wild rice on Mattawoman Creek, Maryland*





*Figure 3: American lotus seed pod on Swan Creek near Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland*

My grandfather grew grapes on his farm. They tasted similar to the wild grapes I found while stand up paddleboarding on the Patuxent River in early autumn. However, like most domestic fruit, the farm grapes were the result of hundreds of years of selective breeding to enhance certain desired traits: large size, high ratio of pulp to seed, longer shelf life, disease resistance, and easy transport.



*Figure 4: Wild grapes on the Patuxent River*

Not all fruit has been domesticated to the same level as grapes. Despite their delightful mango-banana-like flavor, I have yet to see paw paws, the largest edible fruit native to the United States, in the grocery store, largely because they do not transport well. In mid-September, I picked some fruit while hiking along Antietam Creek. After they ripened on the counter for a few days, I peeled them, removed the large lima bean-shaped seeds, and then used the pulp to bake a delicious pink-tinged sweet bread.





*Figure 5: Paw Paws picked near Antietam Creek, Maryland*

Prickly pear cookies are another unique treat I've enjoyed. While helping with a trash cleanup along a sandy part of the Patuxent River one early November, I came across prickly pear cacti bearing fruit, oblong red balls along the edge of the pads. I took several home where my wife cooked them down into a thick pulp and mixed it into a batch of cookies. Although I carefully avoided the large, sharp spines on the paddle-shaped leaves (which are also edible), I got stuck by the glochids, miniscule fuzzy spines that can break off after entering the skin, causing irritation.

Unlike paw paws and prickly pear, which are native, wineberries are an invasive plant that resides in much of the Chesapeake Bay region. It produces a mouthwatering red fruit that ripens in early summer. I've found them growing abundantly while exploring trails at the [Smithsonian Environmental Research Center](#) and Rocky Gorge Reservoir, Maryland. They taste great by themselves, sprinkled on yogurt, or combined with desserts.





*Figure 6: Wineberries picked near Rocky Gorge Reservoir, Maryland*

Wild persimmon is another berry, at least morphologically, that looks like a smaller version of the Asian fuyu persimmon I remember from my childhood. Known as “Apple of the Orient,” “Fruit of the Gods,” and “Nature’s Candy,” persimmons contain a significant amount of vitamin A, vitamin C, and fiber. They are visible in autumn, but will have an astringent (puckery) taste until late in the season, and if they do not fall easily from the tree with a gentle shake, they are likely still unripe.



*Figure 7: American persimmon picked on Winchester Creek near Kent Island, Maryland*

Possibly the most popular form of foraging in the Chesapeake area is mushroom hunting. This activity really took off during the mild, damp spring of 2020, largely due to the popularity of one specific mushroom called morel (shown at top). Morel photos and stories popped up all over the mycology social media sites thanks to an unusually bountiful season. Much has been written about locating them, but the general consensus is that if you discover them, note the location, keep searching the general area, and don't tell others or your secret will be forever lost.

Another delectable fungus is chicken-of-the-woods. In August 2020, I found a large cluster growing on a rotting log while hiking along the Susquehanna River in Maryland. I collected some and fried it up for dinner.





*Figure 8: Daphne with chicken-of-the-woods mushrooms near the Susquehanna River*

Other mushrooms that I've seen in the wild but have yet to eat are wood ear (used in Chinese cuisine), oyster, and lion's mane. The latter is described as having a seafood-like flavor, often compared to crab or lobster. It also supposedly has strong anti-inflammatory, antioxidant and immune-boosting abilities, while tests on animals indicate that it may lower the risk of heart disease, cancer, ulcers, and diabetes.





*Figure 9: Lion's Mane mushroom in a residential part of Savage, Maryland*

Note that not all mushrooms are safe to eat, so do your homework and cross-check with multiple sources before preparing what may be your last meal. Take note of where and when you found the mushroom. What was it growing on? What did it look like when you cut it open? The more information you have, the better informed you will be in determining what is and what isn't toxic.

I've barely touched the surface of foraging, and only from a plant and fungi perspective. Humans have spent over 99% of our existence as foragers, and during the last 1%, a significant amount of that knowledge has been forgotten. Perhaps shortages during the Covid-19 pandemic have inspired us to become more self-reliant, listen to Mother Nature, and re-learn primitive skills once taken for granted.



For more information, see

[Wikipedia – Human](#)

[Human Relations Area Files – Hunter-Gatherers \(Foragers\)](#)

[PaleoLeap – Is Modern Fruit Really Healthy?](#)

[Dave’s Garden - Edible Wild Plants: The American Lotus, Nelumbo lutea](#)

[Ag Web – Pawpaw Returns as History’s Forgotten Fruit](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Program – Paw Paw](#)

[Gardening Know How – Glochid Spines](#)

[Maryland Invasive Species Council - Wineberry](#)

[Wide Open Spaces – The 10 Best Places to Find Morel Mushrooms](#)

[Healthline - 9 Health Benefits of Lion's Mane Mushroom \(Plus Side Effects\)](#)

[Proactive Health Labs - 5 Reasons Persimmons Are Also Called The Fruit of the Gods](#)