Foraging Basics
8 principles of ecologically-sound wild harvesting

1) Harvest only plants that you can identify : the rich & diverse plant kingdom has many nourishing and healing plants to offer us, but also many poisonous ones. Take great care when foraging that you are confident of the identity of the plants. Be especially careful with any members of the carrot family (Apiaceae family), which is notoriously tricky & can be deadly!

2) Pick only where you have permission: in Scotland we have the Right to Roam enshrined in law which gives permission to harvest fruits, nuts and seeds for personal consumption, as long as this right is used responsibly and with respect for the landowner. It is illegal to pick wild plants from a nature reserve without the express permission from Scottish Natural Heritage.

3) Harvest only in abundance; leave no trace of yourself behind: every plant growing in nature exists as part of its own ecological community. When foraging for personal use, always take just enough for your needs, and leave enough for the plant community to thrive and prosper. Take only from common plants growing in abundance. Ideally, once you are finished, there should be no trace that you had ever been there. Take only 10% of a native plant community and 20% of a naturalised plant community. Don't be greedy.

4) Leave plant pioneers to grow and reproduce: Related to point 3, if you come across a species which is the only one of its kind in an area, be sure to leave it to spread and establish in the area.

5) Gather only from clean, vibrant and healthy plants: for medicine making we want to use the most vibrant and flourishing examples of a particular species. Plants that are suffering with insect attacks or poor growing conditions aren't suitable for harvesting.

6) Gather only from unpolluted areas: gather your herbs from areas as far away as you can manage from roads, stables, conventionally farmed fields and any other chemically laden businesses. Henriette Kress suggests gathering beyond the dust of a track, 75 feet from a road, 300 feet from a highway or half a mile from a motorway.

7) Harvest seasonally: there are specific times in the Earth's cycles and seasons when plants yield the best of their medicine. We tend to harvest roots while the plant is dormant in the autumn or early spring; stems are best gathered after leaves appear but before flowering; bark is harvested from small branches in the autumn; leaves are gathered when fully developed but before the plant flowers; flowers are harvested just before fully developed; fruits are picked when they are almost, but not quite ripe; and seeds are picked when they are perfectly ripe.

8) Clean up after yourself: leave any areas you gather from just as tidy when you are finished, as when you arrived. Refill any holes you have dug, remove or conceal any pruned foliage and stems.

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