LOUISE GRAY

WILD AND FREE

Foraging in Scotland is free, tasty and good for you, says **Louise Gray**. But how do we make sure everyone gets a bite without stripping the countryside bare?

FIELD FACTS

The **Right to Roam** gives you permission to forage for wild fruits, nuts and seeds for personal consumption as long as this right is used responsibly and with respect for the landowner.

The Forestry Commission estimate that foraging is worth **£21m** a year to the Scottish economy.

There are about **ten** different edible berries that are found in Scotland's woods, including wild cherries, blaeberries, sloes, rowan and juniper berries.

Foraging in the countryside used to be about sustenance, survival and even magic. Fruits like blackberries were a welcome source of vitamin C before supermarkets provided any choice, wild roots were dug up in times of famine and flowers were used to heal.

Now foraging is about fashion. Celebrity chefs include wild foods in their ingredients, restaurants scatter foraged flowers in salads and any hipster worth their salt spends the weekend romping through the woods with a wicker basket. In Scotland one in five of us foraged wild foods in the last year, according to the Forestry Commission.

At the height of brambling season, I joined Ally Hurcikova and Soraya Bishop for an afternoon foraging blackberries along the Union Canal in Edinburgh. The pair set up Grass Roots Remedies in Edinburgh to teach others how to forage responsibly and make herbal medicines, as well as food. They also run a herbal medicine clinic in Wester Hailes Healthy Living Centre, the first in Scotland to offer alternative healing alongside the NHS. Patients and members of the community are encouraged to join foraging expeditions to make the teas and tinctures they will later use.

Above: Louise picks hawthorn berries in Wester Hailes.

Soraya, 30, says foraging can connect a community with their landscape. Not only by getting people outside but empowering them to feed themselves and heal themselves.

'Food and medicine cannot be separated,' she says.

In less than an hour we find hawthorn berries for curing colds, nettle seeds for protein, dandelion leaves for lowering blood pressure and meadow sweet for a sore tummy.

For Ally it is about learning traditional skills that may have been forgotten in the digital age.

'It is about learning to use your hands and knowledge of the countryside,' she says.

She points out that wild plants contain more protein and vitamins than cultivated fruits and vegetables.

'If this was in the supermarket they would call it a superfood,' she says, popping a blackberry in her mouth.

For example, ground elder is full of protein, rosebay willow herb is packed with vitamin C and dead nettles have more vitamin A than ordinary cabbage.

Dr Wendy Russell, a senior research fellow at The Rowett Institute in Aberdeen, says the latest science backs foraging folklore up. A recent study by a the institute found the 20 most foraged foods in Scotland are full of antioxidants that may help in lowering

Clockwise from top left Louise, Ally Hurcikova and Soraya Bishop forage for blackberries; dandelion leaves for salad and cleansing the liver; blackberries for crumble and vitamin C; calendula flowers drying and other herbs for making tea remedies; hawthorn berries are a great addition to hedgerow jam and are good for heart health.

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Left: The Willow Gardening Group from The Health Agency in Wester Hailes picking blackberries.
Below: Dr Wendy Russell.
Bottom: Autumn bounty of dandelion leaves, hawthorn and blackberries.

our blood sugar levels. For example blaeberries (aka bilberries or whortleberries), that grow wild in Scotland, are 'magnitudes higher' in antioxidants compared to conventional blueberries which are bred to be big and juicy and easily harvested.

Dr Russell has recently carried out a study looking at wild versus heritage versus F1 hybrid cultivated vegetables. The study used five sites around Scotland in order to prove it was not just the environment that was influencing growth. On each site the wild crops were shown to have higher levels of the 'phytochemicals' in plants that may help fight non-communicable diseases like heart disease and cancer.

Dr Russell's theory is that the chemical compounds in wild plants that protect them against insects, herbivores and even wind also generate protective patterns in the human body.

The trouble is that we have bred out many of these chemicals because they also make the plant taste bitter or make it more difficult to harvest.

> "The 20 most foraged foods in Scotland are full of antioxidants

Dr Russell wants the public to start eating these wild foods again, but she is realistic about how we might get foraged foods into our diets. It is simply not possible for everyone to source their daily greens from the wild.

Instead Dr Russell would like to see wild properties bred back into plants and the consumer educated to appreciate those 'bitter' tastes once again. She would also like to see farmers growing more 'weeds' on unproductive land and even isolating some of the protein and other beneficial chemicals in wild plants so they can be added to processed foods. Frozen vegetable lasagne laced with dandelion leaves anyone?

'We will never be able to go back,' she says. 'Foraging is a lovely idea for a very small number of people. We really need to change food, particularly our fruits and vegetables and we need to change them so they contain the nutrients our foods contained long ago.'

For Ally and Soraya foraging should be about understanding as well as using the countryside – including the rules.

The Scottish Outdoor Code forbids foraging for commercial gain and there are other matters of etiquette such as leaving enough elderberries and other important winter foods for the wildlife. Only ever pick what you recognise, as mushrooms in particular can be dangerous if you eat the wrong one. Only take a small amount from each plant and always clean up after yourself.

'It is just as important to not pick as to pick,' says Ally.

She believes that as long as people forage responsibly, there is enough of the common plants such as elderflower, garlic mustard, sea buckthorn and of course blackberries to go round.

'The more people get into foraging the more people feel connected and want to protect and conserve the land,' she adds.

For Ally there is still magic in foraging and waiting for your favourite nut, seed or berry to come into season.

'One of the best things about it is you always have something to look forward to,' she laughs.

Get in touch

@loubgray or get in contact via her website at **www.louisebgray.com** with comments on the article. Have you ever been foraging?