GATHERING PLANTS

It is easy to pick plants here and there, but it is better and safer to gather them systematically.

Take a container on foraging trips – an empty bag, a piece of cloth folded into a sack, a birch-bark box or large leaves stitched together. This stops harvest being crushed, which makes it go off quickly.

LEAVES AND STEMS

Young growth, usually paler green, will be tastier and more tender. Older plants are tougher and more bitter. Nip off leaves near the stem. Leaves simply torn off are easily damaged. They may wilt and lose goodness before they reach the pot.

ROOTS AND TUBERS

Choose larger plants. Some are very difficult to pull up. To lessen the chance of breaking them dig around the plant to loosen, then prise them out with a sharpened stick.

FRUIT AND NUTS

Choose larger plants. Pick only ripe, fully coloured fruits. Hard, greenish berries are indigestible, even after long cooking. Many fruits, especially in the tropics, have tough, bitter skins. Peel them. Nuts lying at the base of a tree are a sign they are ready. Others can be shaken down if the tree is a small one. You may be able to knock others down by throwing a stick.

SEEDS AND GRAINS

PRECAUTION: Some contain deadly poisons. Tasting will not harm you but DO NOT SWALLOW. Carry out the edibility test, reject any seed that is unpalatable, bitter or with a hot, burning taste (unless a positively identified pepper or spice).

FUNGI

Medium-sized are easier to identify and less likely to suffer from insect damage. Pick the whole fungus. If the stem is left on the ground it will be harder to identify the fungi gathered. Keep fungi separate. If a poisonous kind has been picked, it will not then contaminate other food.

PLANTS TO AVOID

WARNING

POISON! There are two fairly common poisons in the plant world, but both are easily detectable:

HYDROCYANIC ACID (Prussic acid) has the taste and smell of bitter almonds or peaches. The most notable example is the Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*), with laurel-like leaves, which contains a closely allied poison. Crush the leaves and remember the smell. Discard ALL plants with this smell.

OXALIC ACID, whose salts (oxalates) occur naturally in some plants, for instance Wild Rhubarb (mostly in the leaves) and Wood Sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*). Recognizable by a sharp, dry, stinging or burning sensation when applied to the skin or tongue. Discard ALL plants which fit this description.

- **AVOID** any plant with a milky sap, unless positively identified as safe (such as dandelion).
- **AVOID** red plants, unless positively identified, especially in the tropics. The red-streaked stalk of Wild Rhubarb is edible but its leaf is poisonous. Hemlock has reddish-purple splotches on its stem.
- **AVOID** fruit which is divided into five segments, unless positively identified as a safe species.
- **AVOID** grasses and other plants with tiny barbs on their stems and leaves. With a magnifying glass you can see them as hooks rather than straight hairs and they will irritate the mouth and digestive tract.
- **AVOID** old or wilted leaves. The leaves of some trees and plants develop deadly hydrocyanic acid when they wilt – including blackberry, raspberry, cherry, peach and plum. All may be safely eaten when young, fresh and dry.
- **AVOID** mature bracken (*Pteridium aquilinium*). It destroys vitamin B in the body, setting up a peculiar blood condition which can cause death. Eat only tightly coiled 'fiddle heads'. All 250 varieties of north temperate ferns are edible when young, although some are too bitter to be palatable and some have irritating hairs which must be removed before eating. Break off the tips as low as they remain tender, close your hand over the stalk and draw the frond through to remove the 'wool'.

IDENTIFYING PLANTS

Only a small selection of the world's many plants can be described and illustrated here, and only a specialist botanist could identify more than a handful of plants in far-flung corners of the world. Begin by learning a few plants that can be found in most conditions and at most times of year. Close familiarity with even one or two could make all the difference between survival and starvation. Learn these first and learn them thoroughly.

- **Temperate zones**: dandelions, nettles, docks, plantains
- **Sub-tropical and tropical zones**: palms, wild figs, bamboo
- **Arid and desert zones**: mescal, prickly pears, baobabs, acacias (but not in North or South America)
- **Polar zones**: spruces and willows (north), lichens (north and south). In summer in north as for temperate zones
- **Coasts**: kelps and lavers