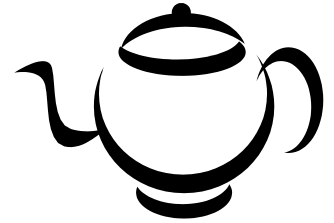


Edible Newfoundland Plants



by **Todd Boland**

Introduction

With the growing awareness of the benefits of eating locally, there is increased interest in the edible plants found around us. From your back yard to the back woods, there is a wide variety of plants that can provide a nutritious supplement to your daily diet. Generally, these plants are pesticide free, are not transported hundreds or thousands of kilometres, are unprocessed, and are free for the picking.

The five common parts of a plant that are generally consumed are the roots, greens, flowers, fruits and seeds. Fleshy roots can be dug up, peeled and used as a carrot substitute in soups or cooked dinners. Greens fall into two groups: those used fresh in salads or those boiled and used as a substitute for spinach or cabbage. They are generally picked early in the season before they get too tough. Some plants offer edible stems. They can be peeled and used as a substitute for celery in soups. Certain flowers can be used to brighten up salads, stir fries, or omelettes. Fruits can be eaten fresh off the bush, made into juice, jams, or jellies, or fermented to make wine.

Which ever way you chose to enjoy them, knowing that you gathered your own food will make it taste that much better. Besides the added nutritional benefits, gathering your own food has both physical and mental benefits, so get out and let your stomach lead the way.

Keep in mind:

- Never pick a plant unless you are certain it is safe. Newfoundland has its fair share of **poisonous** plants. Some can even cause skin irritations and blisters!
- Never eat a plant unless you are certain it is safe to do so.
- Avoid polluted areas (ie. high vehicle traffic areas; bogs with questionable water sources).
- While some plants are edible, they can be damaging to your health if eaten over prolonged periods of time.
- Always make sure you collect sustainably:
 - Never take more than you need or can use.
 - Always leave some plants to regenerate and reproduce.
 - Never collect enough to decimate the local population.
 - Harvest the part of the plant that you need without disturbing the rest of it.
 - Avoid disturbing the habitat.
- Do not forget about the wildlife that may be dependent on the plants for food or shelter.

Serviceberry, Chuckley-pear – *Amelanchier* species

There are six species of this genus found throughout Newfoundland. On the Prairies, they are known as saskatoons. They are small trees (2-5 m) with bright green, oval shaped, toothed leaves. They are found in a variety of habitats including roadsides, woodlands, barrens and pond and stream margins. Chuckley-pears are among the earliest-blooming shrubs, producing masses of white, 5-petaled flowers. These later develop into purple fruit. They can be eaten fresh or used in sauces and pies.

Burdock – *Arctium minus*

Most children are familiar with burdock as the seedheads will stick to your clothes and hair! This alien invasive species of disturbed habitats, is a biennial; in the first year plants produce a large leafy rosette while in the second year they produce tall (1 m), multiple-branched stems with numerous rounded, pink, thistle-like flowers. The edible portion of this plant is the taproot of the first-year plants. It is considered a delicacy in Japan where it is called 'gobo'. The roots are peeled and placed in a bath of vinegar water for 20 minutes before cooking. They have the flavour of salsify. The flower stalks, which taste like radish, may also be peeled and eaten raw or cooked.

Wintercress – *Barbarea vulgaris*

Wintercress is a common weed of waste places across Newfoundland. Plants are biennial, producing a flat rosette of leaves in their first season then upright stems to 1 m in their second. Plants bloom in may-June with upright stems of numerous small yellow flowers. The leaves of first year (non-flowering) plants may be boiled as a green while their flowers may be used as a garnish in salads.

Sea-rocket – *Cakile edentula*

Sea-rocket is a low, somewhat trailing annual plant found among fine cobblestone or sandy beaches across the Province. Plants produce fleshy, spoon-shaped leaves and clusters of tiny white or pale purple, 4-petaled flowers all summer long. The leaves have the flavour of horseradish and are quite peppery. They may be used in salads while the small rounded seedpods can be pickled and used like capers.

Shepherd's-purse – *Capsella bursa-pastoris*

This annual has a low rosette of leaves then wiry upright stems with tiny white, 4-petaled flowers. Plants in late summer may overwinter as a rosette to bloom in May. It is a common agricultural weed. The leaves of this cress and mustard relative are generally eaten raw in salads or cooked in soups. Leaves are best used before plants flower.

Fireweed – *Chamerion angustifolium*

Fireweed is a pioneer species and is commonly found in open fields, pastures and forest clearings throughout Newfoundland. Many narrow, wrinkled leaves are attached to the single stem and the magenta, pink or sometimes white flowers grow in a loose spike at the top of the stem. The fresh young stems may be prepared like asparagus while flowers can be dried and used for tea.

Lamb's-quarters – *Chenopodium album*

Lamb's-quarters is an annual which has somewhat fleshy, arrow-shaped leaves, not unlike its close relative, spinach. Lamb's-quarters are a weed of waste places, roadsides and gardens. It has grey-green leaves and can reach a metre in length. Their flowers are rather nondescript. The leaves may be eaten raw in salads or steamed as a green.

Crackerberry, Bunchberry – *Cornus canadensis*

Crackerberry is a common sight in Newfoundland forests. This plant is easy to identify in that the "flower" is located above a whorl of six, broad, green leaves. The 'flower' is actually a cluster of flowers surrounded by four, white petal-like bracts. The cluster of flowers produces juicy (but lacking in flavour), bright red-orange fruits that can be eaten from plants in the autumn.

Black crowberry – *Empetrum nigrum*

This is a mat-forming evergreen shrub common in bogs, open woodlands, barrens and coastal headlands throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. Leaves are needle-like, alternate and 3-7 mm long and the flowers are inconspicuous and grow in the axils of the upper leaves. Crowberries can be eaten directly from the plant. They are quite juicy but do not have very much flavour.

Japanese knotweed, mile-a-minute – *Fallopia japonica*

The aggressive Japanese knotweed is also known locally as 'mile-a-minute' or 'September mist'. They are robust plants which may reach 2 m or more. The spring stems are reddish. Mature stalks are hollow and the leaves are somewhat rounded. Sprays of tiny white flowers are produced among the upper leaf axils in September. Early spring shoots (under 20 cm) may be prepared like asparagus and the rhizome can be peeled and cooked or roasted.

Strawberry – *Fragaria virginiana*

Wild strawberries are common in disturbed areas throughout Newfoundland. The small plants are easily recognized by their trifoliate (3-leaflet) leaves. In May-June, they produce small white 5-petaled flowers that develop into small but very sweet berries by July and early August. They are wonderful for eating fresh or may be made into preserves or wine.

Creeping snowberry – *Gaultheria hispidula*

The snowberry is a delicate creeping shrub that grows in forests throughout Newfoundland. This plant has small stiff hairs on the stem, under the leaves and also on the fruit. The leaves are leathery, small and oval in shape. The minute whitish flowers are usually hidden under the plants. The distinctive egg-shaped, white berry has a wintergreen flavour and can be added to salads and fruit dishes or can be made into a preserve. The berries and the leaves may also be used to make a refreshing tea.

Cow parsnip – *Heracleum maximum*

Cow parsnips are among our largest-sized herbaceous wildflowers in Newfoundland. Plants produce large, trifoliate (3-leaflets) with deeply serrated margins. In July-August they send up 1-2 m hollow stems topped with large flat clusters of many minute white flowers. This plant is part of the celery family and the young, peeled stems can be used as a celery substitute.

Sea chickweed – *Honkenya peploides*

This perennial plant always grows along sandy portions of beaches. The foliage is yellowish-green with fleshy, oval-shaped leaves which are produced in pairs along a 20-40 cm trailing stem. The flowers are small and white, produced in the upper leaf axils and terminal clusters. The leaves may be consumed at any time as an addition to a salad or pickled as a relish.

Juniper – *Juniperus* species

There are two juniper species in Newfoundland, *J. communis* and *J. horizontalis*. (Note: larch or *Larix* spp. are sometimes referred to as Junipers which is misleading). These are evergreen shrubs that have unique, blue, berry-like cones. A few juniper berries can be used as flavouring in a variety of dishes, especially wild game. They are also the flavouring for gin. Warning: Juniper berries contain a powerful resin and should only be used sparingly and avoided by pregnant woman.

Ostrich fern – *Matteuccia struthiopteris*

Fiddleheads are a spring delicacy. While most unfurling fern fronds are called fiddleheads, the edible fiddlehead comes specifically from the ostrich fern. This fern is rare on the Avalon but can become quite common along streams and wet woodlands in western Newfoundland. When mature, plants produce a vase-shaped clump of large (1 m) feather-shaped fronds. The fiddleheads are harvested while still only a few inches tall and are best steamed for about 10 minutes. They are high in iron and potassium.

Mint – *Mentha* species

There are several species of 'wild' mints in Newfoundland; all are introduced species. They have distinctive square stems and paired leaves which are oval in outline. Most grow in wet areas along streams and ditches and spread rapidly by underground stolons. Their white to pale pink flowers are minute, held in tightly clusters heads in the upper leaf axils and terminally. All parts of the plant produce the distinctive mint fragrance when bruised. Leaves may be dried for use in cooking or used fresh in salads and beverages.

Sweet gale – *Myrica gale*

This is a common, low shrub of bogs and wet areas throughout Newfoundland. Sweet gale is a small, branched deciduous shrub with dull, spoon-shaped leaves. The fruits are waxy, conelike nutlets which can be used as a peppery sage-like spice. The leaves can be used the same way as bay leaves or they can be dried and made into a tea. Warning: sweet gale fruit contain a powerful resin and should only be used sparingly and avoided by pregnant woman.

Evening primrose – *Oenothera biennis*

Evening primrose is an introduced biennial plant found in waste places, roadsides and often, beaches. In its first season plants produce a flat rosette of leaves while in their second year, they produce an upright stem 1-1.5 m with numerous, relatively large, 4-petaled yellow flowers in August-September. Flowers are often closed during the day but open fully in late afternoon. Early spring leaves may be cooked like cabbage or dandelion greens. The roots of first-year plants may be used like carrots but boil them in two changes of water first, then peel.

Seaside plantain – *Plantago maritima*

Seaside plantain is a common coastal plant throughout the Province, usually growing within reach of the ocean spray. In fact, they may even be covered by saltwater during high tides. Plants produce rosettes of narrow, fleshy leaves. The flowers are rather inconspicuous and are arranged on narrow, brown, rattail-like flower stems. The young leaves have a mild salty flavour and may be used in salads and soups.

Alpine bistort – *Polygonum viviparum*

This small plant produces narrow, deep-green leaves and a tiny spike of minute white flowers atop 10-15 cm stems in July. The plant is unusual in producing little nut-like bulbils on the flower stem below the tiny flowers. This plant is most common along the Great Northern peninsula but occurs atop the highest hills and along high ocean cliffs Island-wide. The leaves are edible but the little bulbils and the small tuberous root are most commonly eaten as a soup or salad additive.

Pin cherry – *Prunus pensylvanica*

This large shrub or small tree (3-8 m) is found throughout Newfoundland in burnt-over areas, open woodlands or roadsides. The flowers are small, white and grow in clusters of five to seven. The leaves are toothed and somewhat lance-shaped. The fruits are light red, have a single seed and ripen throughout August. They are quite sour but when sugar is added they make an excellent jam. Warning: the leaves of pin cherry are poisonous.

Chokecherry – *Prunus virginiana*

In Newfoundland, chokecherry is not as common as the pin cherry, but it is considered to be the most widely distributed tree in North America. The leaves are oval in shape with a pointed tip. The white flowers are produced in short, hanging clusters. The fruit are dark purple-black. Chokecherries are also quite sour but make an excellent jam when sugar is added. Warning: the leaves of chokecherry are poisonous.

Roseroot – *Rhodiola rosea*

Roseroot is not that common in eastern Newfoundland but can be abundant in northern areas. The plants usually grow near the ocean. The leaves are fleshy, blue-tinted and arranged in a whorl-like pattern up the length of stems which may reach 15-40 cm. The flowers, produced from May to July, are small and produced in a terminal cluster. Plants are either male or female. Males have yellow flowers while females are orange to purplish. The leaves may be consumed early in the season as a salad additive.

Labrador tea – *Rhododendron groenlandicum*

This evergreen shrub is found throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. The leaves and flowers have traditionally been used to make tea. The leaves are thick, leathery and the underside has a distinctive mat of rusty hairs. It is recommended to collect leaves early in the spring before any growth starts. To make the tea, steep the leaves in hot water for 5-10 minutes. WARNING: When making the tea it is important not to boil the tea leaves as this causes a harmful alkaloid to be released.

Wild rose – *Rosa* species

Roses have been traditionally used as a medicine, food, cosmetic, liquor and potpourri. Rose hips are a source of vitamins C, B₃ and D, bioflavonoids, beta carotene and zinc. They can be eaten raw or can be used to make sauce, jelly or tea, but beware of the “hairs” in the centre. The petals be used to make tea, jams, muffins and syrup or they can be candied or added to salads and sandwiches.

Blackberry – *Rubus canadensis*

There are several species of blackberries in Newfoundland but *R. canadensis* is perhaps the most common. Plants produce arching canes with scattered prickles. Axillary clusters of 5-petaled white flowers are produced in July followed by delicious black raspberry-like fruit in October. They are ideal for eating fresh or making into preserves.

Bakeapple, cloudberry – *Rubus chamaemorus*

Bakeapples are choice berries relished by many Newfoundlanders. In the wild, bakeapple are confined to drier bogs. Plants produce just 1-3 cloak-shaped leaves and a terminal white, 5-petaled flower in June. Plants are either male or female with only the females producing the solitary salmon-orange raspberry-like fruit. They ripen in August and may be eaten fresh or made into preserves.

Raspberry – *Rubus idaeus*

Raspberries grow in cleared areas such as roadsides or clearings in the woods. The prickly canes reach 1-2 metres high and the leaves have 3-7 leaflets. Small, white flowers with five petals grow in loose clusters. These ripen throughout August and September into the familiar red, thimble-like fruit. Raspberries contain vitamins A, B and C, calcium, phosphorus and iron. They can be used to make jams, pies, wine, or eaten fresh off the bush.

Dewberry, Plumboy - *Rubus pubescens*

Dewberries belong to the same genus as raspberries. They creep along the ground in damp, open woodland areas and are usually less than 20 cm high. The leaves have three toothed leaflets. The flowers, which bloom in June, are white to pinkish in colour and develop into bright red, raspberry-like fruit in August. It may take some time to collect these fruits since they are individually produced, but they make excellent pies, jams and jelly.

Sheep sorrel – *Rumex acetosa*

Sheep and garden sorrel are common ‘weeds’ in waste places and garden settings. Plants have reddish-tinted leaves that are shaped like arrowheads. The flowers are reddish but rather insignificant. The leaves have a sour taste and may be eaten raw or cooked as a green. They are rich in vitamin C.

Dock – *Rumex* species

There are several species of dock in Newfoundland, both introduced and native. They produce reddish-tinted, coarse-textured leaves that have long stalks and oval to elongate blades. Their ribbed stems are hollow and may reach to 1.5 m, producing a dense ‘spear’ of tiny white to pink flowers that develop into rusty-brown ‘fruits’ that resemble coffee grounds. Look for them just about anywhere! Spring leaves can be steamed or boiled as a green or used in soups. They are too tough to eat raw.

Dogberry, mountain-ash – *Sorbus* species

There are two native species of dogberry in Newfoundland, along with the introduced European dogberry. They develop into trees up to 10 m in height. Their leaves are compound with many oval leaflets. In June, they develop flat-topped clusters of cream-white flowers that develop into clusters of orange-red berries in September. Dogberries are rather bitter and are best harvested after frost. The seeds contain a toxin called amygdalin (also found in cherry and plum seeds) so the fruit are only useful for jellies. They are also useful for wines and brandies.

Chickweed – *Stellaria media*

This common weed is found through the Province, mostly in garden situations. Plants form a tangled mat 10-20 cm high. The fragile stems are somewhat trailing with pairs of small, oval leaves. The flowers are tiny and shaped like white stars. The stems, leaves and flowers can be used in salads, soups and stirfries.

Comfrey – *Symphytum officinale*

Comfrey is a coarse perennial with large, somewhat hairy elliptical basal leaves. Flower stems reach 1m or taller with numerous pendant white to lilac tubular flowers in August-September. The leaves may be cooked as a green all season and the flower stems may also be blanched

Dandelion – *Taraxacum officinale*

A common but underappreciated plant that grows in disturbed, sunny habitats throughout North America. The roots can be peeled, sliced and boiled in salted water. They can also be baked in the oven, grated and used to make a caffeine free coffee substitute. Roots and leaves have traditionally been used to strengthen and cleanse the body. Leaves can also be added to salads or be eaten as greens, and are best picked before the plant flowers. Flowers can be added to salads or used to make wine.

Clover – *Trifolium* species

Newfoundland has three edible common clovers; alsike clover (*T. hybridum*), red clover (*T. pratense*) and white clover (*T. repens*). The flowers of clovers can be used fresh or dried to make a sweet tea. The leaves can also be used to make a grass tasting tea. Flowers and leaves can be added to salads and young plants can be eaten as greens.

Coltsfoot – *Tussilago farfara*

Coltsfoot is an alien invasive species which is found in disturbed habitats. The flowers superficially resemble dandelions and bloom in early spring. The long-stalked, broadly heart-shaped leaves emerge after most of the flowers have died. Coltsfoot is an expectorant and has traditionally been used as a treatment for coughs and colds as a tea. The flowers, stalks and young leaves can be steamed, sautéed or used in soups.

Cattail – *Typha latifolia*

To spot a cattail stand look for the furry, white, seed heads from the previous year on top of long stalks. The leaves are grass-like, relatively broad and often dull grey-green. The cattail is thought of as one of the most important wild foods because of its variety of uses throughout the year. The young shoots, known as “Cossack’s asparagus”, can be peeled and added to salads, soup, stir-fry and sandwiches. The top, male, portion of the flower head can be steamed or simmered much like corn. The pollen can be collected and used as a nutritious addition to flour. In the fall, winter and spring, the underground rhizome, which stores food, can be eaten raw, baked or boiled.

Stinging nettle – *Urtica dioica*

The stinging nettle is found in disturbed areas across Newfoundland and gets its name from the stinging hairs that cover the plant. This plant grows in clumps and has somewhat hairy, deeply toothed, lance-shaped leaves. Collect leaves (wear gloves) before the plants flower. It is recommended to boil the leaves before use. The young leaves can be steamed and eaten as greens, added to soups and stews or dried to use in tea

Blueberry – *Vaccinium angustifolium*

These Province-wide, low shrubs are commonly found among woodland clearings, on barrens and burnovers. Clusters of white to pinkish, urn-shaped flowers are produced in June. The berries begin ripening by late July and are ideal for eating fresh, but are also used for jams, jellies, tea, desserts, baking and wine. Few native berries have as high an anti-oxidant content as our wild blueberries.

Cranberry – *Vaccinium macrocarpon*

Cranberries are more restricted, usually growing in wet seepage areas near the coast. They are also trailing but not as wiry and have more densely packed leaves. Their flowers are terminal on the stems, blooming July. They also produce a tart red berry after the first hard frost. Their berries are best picked in November when the fruit are at their ripest. They can be used for jams, jellies, pies, baking and wine.

Marshberry, small cranberry – *Vaccinium oxycoccus*

Marshberries are wide distributed across the Province, growing in any open, damp areas. They have wiry, trailing stems with widely-spaced tiny leaves. Their flowers, which are produced in the leaf axils, are pink and star-like. They bloom in June-July, followed by brown speckled berries that turn red after the first hard frost. Their berries are best picked in November when the fruit are at their ripest. They can be used for jams, jellies, pies, baking and wine.

Alpine bilberry – *Vaccinium uliginosum*

Alpine bilberry, known locally as ground hurts, are found throughout the Province on exposed barrens, headlands and mountaintops. Plants form low mats with rounded, blue-tinted foliage. The pinkish flowers, which are produced in May-June, are usually hidden under the shrubs. They develop into blue berries by late July. While they look much like our wild blueberries, the fruit are solitary, not clustered, and each berry has a short, thread-like 'bill'. They can be used in the same manner as the standard blueberries.

Partridgeberry, lingonberry – *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*

The partridgeberry, which is also known as the mountain cranberry or lingonberry, is found on barrens throughout Newfoundland. This plant is an evergreen, creeping shrub with shiny, leathery leaves. Pink, urn-shaped flowers are produced in June-July and develop into tart, red berries by late August. The berries can be eaten from the plant or be used in pies, jams, baked goods and even wine.

Squashberry – *Viburnum edule*

The squashberry is an erect or straggling shrub which is found along brooks, in wet thickets and the edges of woods. The leaves, which are vaguely reminiscent of maples, are opposite, three-lobed and toothed. The flowers are white and grow in clusters. The berries are red and contain a single large seed. They can be eaten from the plant or can be used to make jelly.

Northern wild raisin – *Viburnum nudum*

The wild raisin, which can reach 3 m or higher, grows in moist soils throughout Newfoundland. The leaves are dark green, shiny, opposite and turn red in the fall. The yellowish-white flowers are produced in flat-topped clusters in June. The fruits change from cream to pink to purplish-black and resemble dried currents when fully ripe. Fruit can be eaten from the plant or they can be cooked, however, they do contain a large central seed.

Highbush cranberry – *Viburnum opulus var. trilobum*

Highbush cranberry is not particularly common in Newfoundland. They grow mostly along rich river bottoms in central and western parts of the Island. Flat-topped clusters of white flowers are produced in June followed by drooping clusters of shiny red berries in autumn. The tart fruit are at their best after frost. They may be used for jams and jellies.

Violets – *Viola* species

All native violets have edible leaves useful in salads or soups. Their flowers may also be used as a colourful garnish in salads. Most violets grow in damp areas such as seepages, pond or river margins or damp forests. They are low plants 10-25 cm with somewhat heart-shaped leaves held atop long leaf-stalks. They produce white to purple flowers mostly in June.