

The SSC Code Wild Food

A guide for sustainable and safe harvesting

Time to get those nettles? What about the brambles, even pine seeds?

Harvesting, cooking and eating wild food is a brilliant way to enjoy nature. However, to ensure you have only a positive impact on the environment as well as on yourself and friends, follow the SSC Code as a guide to keep you safe and the environment healthy too!

Sustainability

When harvesting wild food, it is important to remember that wild plants and fungi are the only food source of many of our fur and feathered friends. Remember squirrels and pine martens can't go to the supermarket! With an exponential growth in the trend for harvesting wild food in the UK, sustainability needs to be our number one concern. Below are some guidelines to help you do your bit to care for the natural environment whilst also having a great time:

- Harvest only common plants remembering that your plant maybe locally abundant but nationally rare. Before you pick check out a few resources like [Plants for a Future](#) or The [Plant List](#).
- Pick only for the pot- that is for yourself and a friend. Some say take only 10%, but this ratio of harvesting doesn't really work out if you can imagine 10 people visiting the area and taking their 10%.
- If you intend to pick commercially, you will need to contact the landowner for permission.
- Replant as you go! If you are taking berries or seed, why not get a stick, make a small hole in the ground and plant a couple of berries or seeds at the site? Just like jays or squirrels you can be part of ensuring the next generation of trees/plants can grow!

Safety - Surroundings

Before for even decide to harvest it is important to look at the surroundings to ensure it is a 'safe' place to collect wild food. Is the plant itself poisonous and/or is the environment the plant is growing in hazardous?

These are some things to consider:

- Avoid plants and fungi growing near traffic or footpaths as they may have picked up pollutants or animal droppings (think dog-walkers)
- Fields where cattle or other livestock waste run-off can pose an e-coli risk.
- Fields where farmers have just sprayed herbicides or pesticides can also pose a risk.
- Foot fouling. Be aware that you or your friends may have dog poo on the soles of your shoes. Avoid walking over the patch of wild food you are thinking about picking! This is particularly relevant if you are with a group of people.

There are chemicals or compounds in foraged foods which are known to have an adverse reaction in some people (even if you have identified the plant correctly and followed the SSC code) so take great care where and what you harvest and try only a small amount of any wild food first to see if you have any allergies

Certainty - Is it what you think it is and have you identified it correctly?

There aren't many poisonous wild plants in the UK compared to the number of edible varieties, HOWEVER, that does not mean that there aren't any! **The UK is host to some very poisonous species of plants and mushrooms that will make you very sick and can even kill you.**

Taking time to correctly identify your plant before you are going to eat it is absolutely essential. How do you know there isn't a similar looking plant that is toxic? You can identify your plant by either being with someone who is occupationally competent, (i.e. a botanist or mycologist, a wild food expert) who can confirm to you that the plant, berry, fruit or mushroom is what you think it is. Or you can attend a variety of trainings and courses that teach you how to identify plants and fungi using a variety of field guides.

There are many books and [websites](#) dedicated to wild food identification and uses. It is a good idea to **cross reference your findings with a few different reliable sources**, depending on the resource you are using, as some authors are willing to take greater 'risks' with what they eat than others. By cross referencing their work you will be able to see these 'risks' /discrepancies and act with appropriate caution.

Please note that due to the occasional variations in appearance (which could be due to the age of the plant, the environment region or country it is growing in) a photo or illustration can often differ slightly from how a plant or mushroom appears in real life.

Contraindications

A contraindication is a pharmaceutical term used to indicate whether a drug or chemical has any adverse effects. It is a useful term to apply to wild food for a variety of reasons. For example, birch leaf tea can be delicious, but it's also known to be a diuretic, and this should be taken into consideration if you are already using diuretic medicine or have high blood pressure.

You can usually find a list of contraindications for plants in any good clinical medical herbalist books or on reputable on-line databases.

Summary

SSC Code for harvesting and eating Wild Food.

Sustainably: Is your harvesting of a plant or mushroom SUSTAINABLE? Is there enough of your plant in the area? Is it a protected species?

Safety: Is your plant SAFE from herbicides/insecticides, dog faeces and other pollutants or waste products e.g. car fumes, areas where livestock are kept etc.

Certainty: Are you CERTAIN you have identified it correctly? Do not identify a species using only one resource, make sure you use several. Also, don't assume that if you can eat one part of a plant, that you can also eat all other parts. For example, you can eat the flowers of Elder but the leaves will make you very sick. **DO YOUR RESEARCH!**

IF IN DOUBT LEAVE IT OUT!

The Law

It is legal to pick the vegetative part of plants (their fruit and flowers) from common land if it is for your own consumption. However, check with local by-laws that might contravene this assumption. If you are on private property, essentially you need to have permission from the landowner to pick any part of a plant, however, the law is complicated in this regard.

Under *the Wildlife and Countryside Act* and *Theft Act* it is illegal to up-root any plant or pick-to-sell any part of a plant unless you have the landowner's permission.

Make sure you check your local by-laws first as this right-to-pick, even on common ground, might vary in different locations around the country.

The Scottish Access Code says that "Customary picking of wild fungi and berries for your own consumption is not affected by the legislation. Care for the environment by following any agreed guidance on this activity. However, being on or crossing land or water for the purpose of taking away, for commercial purposes or for profit, anything in or on the land or water is excluded from access rights."

The [Scottish Wild Mushroom Code](#) provides further information on how to collect wild fungi responsibly.