

EVERY FRIDAY

# The Lady

6 APRIL 2012

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# Walk on the wild side

*Escorted by wild-food expert Rachel Lambert, Elizabeth Walters goes foraging for supper in the Scilly Isles*

**P**eter Rabbit got in a pickle when he pinched carrots from Mr McGregor's garden. He would have been better off tucking into wild foods than risking the well-tended vegetable plot. For the McGregors among you will know that this time of year is 'the hunger gap', when little to nothing in the garden is ready to eat. The opposite is true in the wild. Early spring heralds new plants that are brimming with goodness.

Wild-food expert Rachel Lambert, who leads foraging weekends around the Scilly Isles and in Cornwall, says she continues to be amazed from season to season by the variety of flavours Nature provides.

A veggie would be blissfully happy living on the bounty of the Scillies – meat-eaters, fish-lovers and gourmands are equally well catered for. This particular foraging trip is run by Hell Bay hotel, on Bryher, where talented chefs are on hand to turn our amateur pickings into a professional feast.

After breakfasting on fresh eggs provided by the hotel's chickens, we head out with Rachel to see what's on Bryher's menu. Rachel's philosophy is to enjoy this very special environment, while learning about plants specific to the islands and identifying those that will be easy to find at home. All the seaweeds are, of course, only found in coastal regions, but plants like the three-cornered leek (its stem has three sides), nettles and sorrel can be foraged in most places. Even in London's parks, she promises.

Our hunting takes us around the west of the island to the east, facing Tresco, which is owned by the Dorrien-Smith family. We pause over rock pools and admire bright green tubular gutweed tangled in the water, search for the juiciest-looking patches of sea spinach by the beach and wander into abandoned daffodil fields for gorse flowers.

Many of the plants are recognisable. Sea spinach, for instance, is not unlike normal spinach, only with thicker, glossier and waxier leaves. Hogweed (also called poor

Forage salad



ADAM WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY, GETTY IMAGES, STOCKFOOD

*'Plants like nettles and sorrel can be foraged in most places – even London...'*



Elizabeth (in straw hat) with the foraging party



Nettle soup





man's asparagus) looks like a feathery asparagus and can be served the same way. Like enthusiastic goats, we try everything. At first it's strange to chew on a stem but it's thrilling to experience the sweet, sour and sometimes peppery (scurvy) flavours.

There are some basic rules for successful foraging, chief among them being that picking nettles requires gloves. Some plants can be misleading. Inedible lords and ladies (a common arum) is often mistaken for sorrel. True sorrel will have a ribbed stem, spear-shaped leaf, pointed ends and a straight tear (ie, not along the vein) when you rip the leaf. But usually, if it tastes wrong, it is wrong.

In the afternoon, our basket of green and yellow goodies is delivered to the kitchen by Rachel and by evening, we're settling into a five-course menu. Nettle soup has never tasted so good. Crispy seaweed with lemon-sole tempura and wild sorrel aioli is delicate and delicious. Cornish beef is served on a bed of polenta with sea spinach, scurvy grass and chestnut mushroom, and fragrant gorse-flower crême brûlée rounds it all off wickedly.

Part of the satisfaction is in the picking. Hell Bay sits on the west side of Bryher, overlooking the sea, rocks and horizon. When the wind blasts in, the waves smash against the boulders and outlying, uninhabited islands. The air is so clean and fresh it tingles – and that isn't just because it's chilly. I've never felt quite so well from a weekend away as I do after staying here – and that's despite the Cornish beef and crême brûlée. It's invigorating.

The wild side of Bryher, largely uninhabited and covered in purple, brackish gorse, is like some prehistoric outcrop. The slim, pitted path along the coast takes you past textured blocks of rock that spill out into the sea, small scraggy bays and up steep hills to the top of the island. Looking out to sea makes me stop dead. It has an elemental pull. No wonder writers hole up on this island – Michael Morpurgo among them. It can't be bad growing up here, either. Few doors are locked. The commute to school is by boat and teenagers' first cars tend to be motorised lawn mowers. Gigging is an island sport and every island, except Bryher, has a cricket pitch. On our second day of foraging, we take the boat to Tresco.

This island is well known for its plants and is home to famous Abbey Garden. It was here that Princess Diana, Charles and the boys holidayed, staying in the Dorrien-Smith's family home. The garden is an exotic playground. It's filled with trees – which provide respite from the wind, so you can explore without being blown to bits, even in a

gale – and sub-tropical flowers, including many varieties of protea, from South Africa. We're not in the Abbey to forage though there is a very neat kitchen garden, which serves the family. But the sheltered walkways are a relief after the bluster outside its green walls. The garden teaches you something of the island's maritime history, with a haunting display of ships' figureheads. Hundreds of ships have sunk off the Scillies and these strident busts demonstrate ship design over thousands of years.

Tresco, which is more manicured and tree-filled than Bryher, yields Bermuda buttercups, chickweed and celery-like Alexanders. We also find frosted orache, which is such an ancient ingredient that it was found in the stomach of prehistoric man. Though I'm not sure he would have served it with a beetroot salad.

This is a nourishing way to eat. Rachel is a picture of health and radiates an enviable calm. It won't be so easy or so appealing to forage in my London backyard. But I will keep my now-trained eyes peeled. And who knows, I might just spot supper on my way home. ♦

## Travel facts

- ♦ Wild food foraging weekends: 21 to 24 April; 21 to 24 September.
- ♦ A three-night break at Hell Bay hotel costs £705 per person, including en-suite accommodation, return helicopter flights, dinner, bed and breakfast, wild-food walks, entry to Abbey Garden and boat excursions. Hell Bay: 01720-422947, [www.hellbay.co.uk](http://www.hellbay.co.uk)
- ♦ Fly by Skybus to St Mary's from Southampton, Bristol, Exeter, Newquay or Land's End, followed by boat transfer. Prices from £60 one way, based on a Land's End departure. Book through Isles of Scilly Travel: 0845-710 5555, [www.iostravel.co.uk](http://www.iostravel.co.uk)
- ♦ First Great Western runs trains to Newquay: 0845-700 0125, [www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk](http://www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk)

## NETTLE SOUP

### Serves 4-6

- ♦ 150g nettles, washed and drained
- ♦ 2-3 potatoes, chopped
- ♦ 1 large onion, chopped
- ♦ garlic cloves, chopped, to taste
- ♦ olive oil
- ♦ knob butter
- ♦ 1 litre hot stock (chicken or vegetable)
- ♦ cream, to taste

First, prepare the nettles. Cut the stems off, leaving just the fresh, young leaves; discard any discoloured or dubious-looking leaves – you can do this easily by picking up the nettle tops by the main stalk, compressing the leaf stalks together with your fingers and cutting across the tops with scissors. If you are worried about being stung, wear gloves.

Sauté the potatoes, onion and garlic in a 2-litre saucepan with a splash of olive oil and a bit of butter to taste. When the onion starts to soften and the potato is forming a slight crust, drop in the nettles and give them a quick whisk around with a spatula. Then add your stock – with more boiling

water if you think it needs it. Stir and let it bubble for about 12 minutes, or until the potato is soft. Cool quickly to retain the colour by surrounding the container with ice, or put it into the freezer for five minutes.

Put the soup through a liquidiser once it has cooled, then return to the pan to warm it when you are ready to serve.

To serve, pour into a bowl and add a spoonful of cream. Swirl the cream around with the back of a spoon to make an interesting shape. Add salt and pepper to taste.

## FORAGE SALAD

Gathered on St Agnes, Scilly Isles  
A mix of:

- ♦ sea sandwort
  - ♦ chickweed
  - ♦ tree-mallow flowers
  - ♦ three-cornered leek flowers
  - ♦ borage flowers
  - ♦ Bermuda buttercup flowers
- Mix together in a bowl, arranging the flowers on the top. You can also add nasturtium flowers, sorrel, mustard leaves and bulk out with mixed salad leaves, if necessary.