

A NEW APPROACH TO FORAGING

The Worldwide Forager



Roger Phillips

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A photograph of pink flower petals and a flower head on a white background. The petals are scattered, with some showing a yellowish base. The flower head is in the bottom right corner, partially cut off.

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I am indebted to numerous
people for their help, especially
the following:

Tristan Coverdale, who has
photographed some of his
special plants for me, his wife,
Natalie, and his sharp-eyed
daughters, Ella and Amelie

Yvonne Cocking

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Henrique Raposo

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Roger Phillips

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Introduction



In my first foraging book, *Wild Food*, I experimented with many of the traditional recipes that country folk had used for centuries but, in this book, I wanted to look beyond the confines of local historical knowledge and break new foraging ground by seeking out wild plants and recipes from around the globe: mushrooms from eastern Europe, shoots from China and Japan, edible flowers with medicinal properties, plants used by Native Americans and tubers from the home of all tubers – South America.

The most formative years of my youth were spent with my grandparents, Sally and Eddie, on their farm in Flaunden, Hertfordshire. It was in the early days of the Second World War, and my brother Bobby and I had been sent away from Uxbridge to the farm to get away from the bombing of the Blitz. I spent my days wandering the fields, bringing in the cows and cutting up kale fodder for the animals, mucking out and generally helping my grandfather. The work had to be done whatever the weather; in short, I became used to always wading about in deep mud and getting filthy.

In 1970 I felt that my young son, Sam, was growing up a 'townie' – too cosseted and protected – so I decided it was time he got covered in mud, too, and learnt a little bit more about the countryside. Nicky, my new partner, and I introduced a regime whereby we spent every Sunday in the country, exploring areas near the Grand Union Canal. We would cook our lunch in the woods on an open fire and explore the canalside area for trees to climb and plants to identify.

This experience was what gave me the inspiration to write my first book, *Wild Flowers of Britain*, which was published in 1977. After a few Sundays wading through streams and cooking in the open, Sam invited a friend to join in the adventure, and from then on the whole thing grew; often five or six other children would join us, sometimes bringing their parents along too! We ventured out whatever the weather: rain, sleet or snow. Now, Sam does extreme

off-road cycling challenges that are very muddy, so I suppose my aim to toughen him up was achieved!

It was a wonderful period of my life spent learning, and encouraging the youngsters to learn, too. Those days with my grandparents, and later with my son, have stuck with me, and this book is born out of those times of exploration and adventure. My motto is, 'if it ain't fun, don't do it.' Cooking over an open fire or barbeque is still at the top of my list when it comes to having a good time. And it is not just a summer sport – every year, I cook on the barbeque for the whole family on my birthday in mid-December.

While working on my mushroom book, and the numerous plant and gardening books I have produced over the last forty-five years, I have travelled all over the world, plant-hunting. As I travelled, I noted what people grew, ate and foraged, and this background information has led me to this book. A good example of this was a road trip that Nicky and I made in the north-western states of the USA in 2016. We visited Idaho in search of the history and culture of the Nez Perce Native American tribe, and on one part of our journey we were given camas bulbs to eat (a staple), which we then followed up with a study of other hunter-gatherer foods. It was an eye-opener to me to discover a range of new roots and tubers that we in our supermarket-trained lives have forgotten about or dismissed. However, it must be said that in farmers' markets (my preferred type of supermarket), we are beginning to see the introduction of many new and exciting varieties of roots, tubers, squashes, salads, potatoes and tomatoes.

And so, this invariably led to another step along the path to this book: the building of a little experimental edible garden at our cottage in Wiltshire. It is three metres by four metres, and I have managed to cram in about forty different species of edible plants. In the late winter and very early spring, I have pansies and primulas, then a raft of perennials: day lilies, monarda, campanula, pinks, marigolds, togetes, nasturtiums, gladioli and cornflowers, followed by late flowerers such as sunflowers, dahlias, climbing tropaneolium, oca and potatoes. Two raised beds of herbs complete the planting. This season, I have planted maize, so that I can experiment with the Three Sisters planting system, used by the Native Americans.

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How to Use This Book

The book is divided into four sections, which represent the type of plant being foraged. Section one deals with Mushrooms and Fungi, a subject that I have never lost interest in since I started work on my first mushroom book; indeed, the more I study, the larger the world of fungi seems to get. This section takes another look at some of the great edible mushrooms, principally following up new ideas and uses from all over the world and discovering how different nations have used them in their diet across the centuries.

Section two is concerned with Flowering Plants and finding out how they have been used since ancient times as both medicines and edibles. I discovered that so many of the common garden plants, which can be eaten, were originally used in primitive times as medicines. Some of the earliest gardens that we know about are the gardens of monasteries and convents. These gardens were basically created as medicine cabinets; growing plants that were known to be beneficial to health is the root of modern gardening. With that in mind, is it any wonder that research into garden flowers reveals that almost all of them have a medicinal history?

The third section covers Fruit and Nuts, and finally, section four features Roots and Tubers, with special attention to the plants of South America, where many genera of the rest of the world can be found in a form with edible tubers.

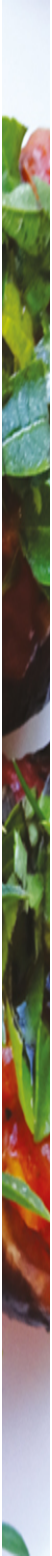
The order of these sections is, in addition, quite purposeful; they follow the seasons of the year, just as the hunter-gatherers did.

If your local shops do not have all the ingredients mentioned, most likely you will find them available on the web; but of course, the most exciting way of getting lots of these unique, special plants is to grow them yourself, even if it is only in a window box. As my travels have done for me, I hope this book will inspire you, too, to experiment.

OPPOSITE: Recipe for grilled mushrooms, see page 44



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SECTION ONE

MUSHROOMS AND FUNGI

WE NOW KNOW that eating mushrooms dates back at least eighteen thousand years. In 2015, the details of dramatic new evidence of man's early use of fungi was found in a cave in Spain. Whilst examining the body of the so-called Red Lady of El Mirón, spores of several species of mushroom were found stuck in her teeth. Previous evidence of mushroom eating had relied on literary evidence dating back over two thousand years. There is ample evidence from Roman times of the popularity of wild mushrooms, but the discovery of the Red Lady of El Mirón is the first time there has been any solid evidence of very early hunter-gatherers eating mushrooms.

Collecting mushrooms to consume has recently become an area of fierce debate. In many cases, woodland authorities in Britain have sought to ban collecting, claiming that it is interfering with the natural development of the plant. I find this a truly debatable position. For instance, we know that truffles give out an odour that encourages wild boar to seek and eat them. All the mushrooms that we eat are the fruit bodies of the plant and by fruiting, the fungus is attempting to distribute the spores from which new fungi will develop. Anything that helps to distribute those spores over a larger area is, in fact, helping to propagate the plant. Thus, it could be argued that collecting and moving the fruit bodies of fungi is doing exactly what is needed for the fungi in terms of distributing its spores over a much wider area.

Eating wild mushrooms is a traditional part of our foraging heritage, but if you eat any wild mushrooms, be absolutely positive of the identification. Remember there are poisonous and deadly poisonous species which can be confused with good edibles, so be ultra-careful.

SECTION ONE MUSHROOMS AND FUNGI

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Finding Manna, the Desert Truffle (*Terfezia arenaria*)

We first met Tristan Coverdale when he was visiting England for the annual Medicinal Mushroom Conference, organised by The Wild Side of Life, and he invited us to visit his quinta, his orchard home in Portugal. What convinced us to go was his description of a festival held in a nearby village every March to celebrate the arrival of the *Terfezia arenaria*, otherwise known as the desert truffle – a fungus I had been itching to find for years.

The desert truffle is found all over North Africa and the Middle East, and northern parts of Spain and Portugal. The Bedouin tribes believe that this truffle is to be found where lightning strikes, which is true in that lightning is usually a precursor of rain, and all mushrooms need water to expand. In Spain, this fungus grows in association with the little rock rose known locally as *herba turnera* (it used to be called *Tubaria guttata*, but has now been moved to another genus, *Xolanta guttata*). It is found in open grassland areas where there is sandy, acid soil. It is quite common in the Extremadura region, where it is called *criadilla de tierra* or *patata de tierra*. *Terfezia* is of great interest in ethnomycology, as it is mentioned in both early Jewish and Islamic texts as one of the few readily available desert foods of North Africa and southwest Asia. It is probable that it was the Manna that the Bible says was gathered by the Israelites during their times in the desert. The prophet Muhammad is reported to have also referred to desert truffles as Manna, and he described their medicinal use combating eye diseases.

The truffle is still very much in demand, either fresh or tinned. There is a different species that is found in alkaline soils, *Terfezia albida*, which is found in the dry soils around Albacete and Murcia in Spain.

The day we went out to search for this exciting truffle, we were led by Henrique Raposo, a local mushroom expert who has a business growing shiitake mushrooms on oak logs. As well as Tristan, we were also accompanied by Melissa Waddingham, an English truffle-hunting expert – unfortunately without her truffle hounds!

We had timed our search for March, the month of the local festival, but that year spring was exceptionally late and cold, so we were probably a week or two early; with the benefit of

OPPOSITE TOP: Finding our first *Terfezia*

OPPOSITE BELOW: *Terfezia* ready to cook



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ABOVE: *Xolanis guttata* photographed by Tristan

OPPOSITE TOP: Right, my friend and guide in Portugal, Tristan Coverdale, and Gravitio Henriques

OPPOSITE BELOW: *Tarfezia arenaria* photographed by Gravitio



hindsight, the first week of April might have been a better time for our expedition. The desert truffle was even harder to locate than the heavy *amanita* (page 16) although eventually we saw signs of shallow digging by wild boar – these creatures are much better than humans at finding underground fungi. The scratchings were a useful guide and Melissa, relentless in her search, was, to her great joy, eventually the first of our party to unearth one.

Unlike the famous white truffles of Italy, the Périgord truffle and our own summer truffle, this hidden treasure does not have the strong sexual pheromone scent characteristic of those truffles, and is only found by diligent searching in the vicinity of the low-growing rock rose. My advice when hunting is to look for signs of boar scratchings and a tiny bulge in the soil that the truffle makes as it grows and expands.

On our return to the *quinta*, Melissa carefully peeled the specimens we had found and then we briefly fried them with shallots. They had no strong flavour, but were pleasantly crisp to eat and, of course, after the long day's hunting, we were all ready for a glass of wine.

In the Arab world, the traditional way of cooking them is baking, just as they are, in the hot embers of a fire, just as my father Philip cooked potatoes in the embers of our Guy Fawkes Night fire on 5 November when I was young.



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ABOVE: *Xolanta guttata* photographed by Tristan

OPPOSITE TOP: Right, my friend and guide in Portugal, Tristan Coverdale, and Gravito Henriques

OPPOSITE BELOW: *Terfezia arenaria* photographed by Gravito

Heavy Amanita (*Amanita ponderosa*)

On our desert truffle-hunting expedition, we drove to the Spanish border and started searching for heavy amanita in the open, evergreen oak woods, typical of this very arid area. It would have been a hopeless task on our own, but we had the help of one of the foremost Portuguese mycologists, Gravito Henriques, who quickly explained that in the dry, hot conditions that prevail in that area, the mushroom remains underground until it is fully developed. As it turned out, the year we went the winter had been very cold and spring was late, so the mushrooms were still totally underground. However, Gravito searched under the oaks and eventually was able to teach us to look for a slightly cracked distortion of the ground and, on digging, we discovered the button forms of this exciting, edible Portuguese speciality beneath the earth's surface.

On our return to the quinta, we cooked them quickly in Tristan's own olive oil with a squeeze of garlic. The day of searching was long and tiring, but the result was worth it. Delicious.

OPPOSITE TOP: The heavy amanita hunt in Portugal with Tristan's wife Natalie, daughters Ella and Amelie, Melissa, Henrique Raposo, Tristan and me

BELOW AND OPPOSITE BELOW: The mushroom develops underground, like many mushrooms in hot, dry areas. Photographed by Gravito







MUSHROOMS AND FUNGI

Cep, Porcini, Steinpilz or Penny Bun (*Boletus edulis*)

This is native to Europe and Asia and is now found in some areas in the southern hemisphere, probably introduced with the planting of European forest trees. It can be found in mixed woodland, in conjunction with many different tree species, but it is most frequently seen in coniferous woodland. It is part of a large complex of similar species with variable cap colours. Many of the varieties grow with a specific tree, however, all the varieties have a fine network – think of the look of a nylon stocking – on the upper region of the stem. Considered one of the very best edible fungi, it contains a high level of protein – not as much as meat or cheese, but far more than any green vegetable. It is a popular food across Russia and Scandinavia and most of Europe, but especially prized in Italy and France. It seems possible that one of the mushrooms that the Red Lady of El Mirón (an 18,700-year-old skeleton found in Spain) ate was indeed a boletus, as evidenced by one of the spores stuck in her teeth, which was the correct spore shape for a *Boletus edulis*.

PASTA SAUCE

In Italy, *Boletus edulis* is commonly used as a sauce for all kinds of pasta. Clean and dice the mushrooms and fry for 2–3 minutes in olive oil, then add chopped parsley and finely chopped garlic and continue to fry for another couple of minutes. Add a little butter, a touch of salt and pepper to taste, and toss with the cooked pasta. Serve as hot as possible with a dusting of Parmesan.

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