

Eating the Weeds

By Andreae Downs, Newton City Councilor

“If you can’t beat them, eat them” (att. Euell Gibbons)

In these pandemic times when food delivery and even pickup is a game of chance, my home unit of three has started cooking with the invasive plants we pull.

Many of our invasive plants originally were brought to the United States because they were delectable. Purslane, dandelion, garlic mustard, they all were planted in herb gardens — and then proceeded to take over the landscape.



In fact, when scouting a high-end restaurant-

delivery service, my daughter found that garlic mustard and Japanese knotweed command premium prices! (Remember in Colonial times, salmon and lobster were considered food for the poor?)

If you know a plot of clean land (not somewhere oil or pesticides might have been dumped, for instance), and take proper pandemic precautions (gloves and a mask are a must,

along with the hat and sunscreen), you can supplement the larder and even boost your vitamin intake (as both plants are packed with nutrients).

Garlic mustard, a member of the broccoli family, can be cooked like a more delicate broccoli raab. Friends of Cold Spring Park who attended my fundraiser in February sampled them in “spinach pies” with feta. (They were a hit.)

I have used them instead of spinach in the Indian curry called Saag. You may want to cut them with some actual spinach for a milder version, but we like the additional flavor.

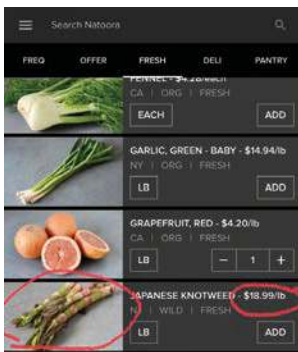
In the Cuisinart with some walnuts, actual garlic cloves, and a splash of olive oil, I’ve made raw garlic mustard into pesto. It’s not a basil pesto, but it works well on pasta or pizza.

Japanese knotweed can be used instead of rhubarb. It is less sour, so you may want to add less sugar. We have baked it into a fruit bread. Euell Gibbons has a recipe for knotweed pie in his book *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* (\$10 on Kindle).

Tips:

1. Use the tender parts of the plant, the young knotweed shoots, or the tops of the garlic mustard. Throw the roots in the trash, not the compost, to destroy the plant, which we don’t want overtaking our open spaces.
2. Put the parts you plan to eat in a large basin of cold water to clean and freshen. Remove any dead leaves, sticks, and other plants from the basin. Swish the plants around and remove before draining the basin—we use our kitchen sink— to get rid of any grit. Repeat at least once.
3. Mince the remaining clean plants before use—unless you are making pesto. I find there are often tough pieces I have missed, and this method gets a more palatable end-product.
4. When in the spring or summer is each plant best harvested? It’s really when they are big enough, usually just when there are groups doing the garlic mustard pulls.

The season for picking ends soon — but the pesto freezes well, and so do the finished pies. Help a park, and enjoy! ♦



Graphics of garlic mustard and Japanese knotweed courtesy of Andreae Downs

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