

Misc Adventures Digest: Wild Winter Warmers

Hello and welcome to our winter foraging guide!

Winter is a time of slowing down. The daylight is short, the nights long and we spend more time indoors, staying warm and cosy in our homes. It's a time to rest if we can, to let our bodies and minds slow down a little - the manic energy of summer behind us - to spend time letting ideas grow, planning for the year ahead and reflecting on what's been.

In many ways, all of Nature is doing the same. Trees have shed their leaves, seeds have been dispersed, perennial plants have died back to their basal leaves. Although it seems to be sleeping, Nature is quietly at work. Plants are sending energy into roots, ready to boost growth in spring. Seeds are sprouting under ground, in the darkness of the soil, waiting for their phenological signal to emerge into the light. Fungi and bacteria are breaking down fallen leaves and other plant matter, creating new fertile soil. There is much preparing, but slowly and with purpose.

Winter is not a bumper time for foraging, but there is still treasure to be gathered. It's also a good time to be using the jams, syrups and dried herbs of spring and summer, to keep us topped up with plant goodness!

I've put together a few ideas for lovely ways to warm your body and spirit with foraged ingredients over the next few months, I hope you give them a try and I'd love to hear how you get on.

Warm wishes,
Emma



Juniper Hand Bath

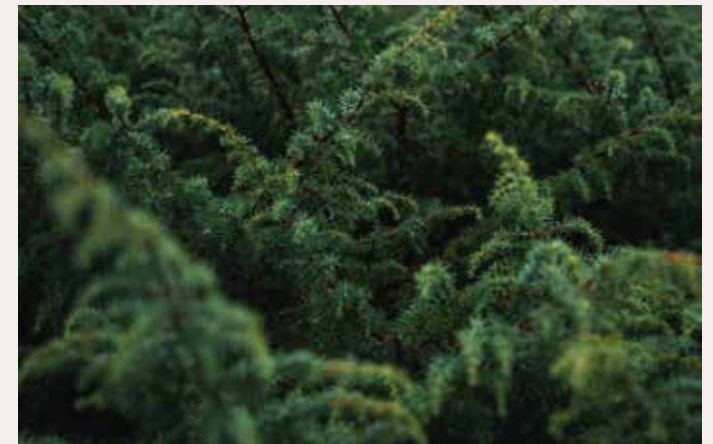


Juniper is one of only 2 conifers native to the UK, the other being Yew. It is sadly in decline in a lot of the UK but doing well in Northern regions such as Scotland and the Lake District. We recently stumbled upon a large area of it close to where we live, which was a lovely surprise. Juniper is dioecious, (male and female parts are on separate plants), this means it needs a healthy, population of both male and female plants in the same area in order to survive.

Juniper is said to have many qualities and has been used in herbal medicine for centuries. Known widely for its berries, which can be used for culinary purposes and most famously as the flavouring for gin. Interestingly, the berries are not berries at all, but modified cones. After being fertilised by the male pollen, they mature over a couple of years from green, to dark purple, almost black, tiny spheres. They can be gathered and used fresh in cooking, or dried, for later use.

I recently read about the anti-rheumatic properties of juniper, it can apparently help with joint pain as an infused oil or, as I have described here, a hand bath. If you have painful, achy joints, I hope you will give it a try and let me know if it helps. The smell alone is lovely.

In folklore, the smoke of burning juniper was said to keep demons away and it can be used as a smudge stick, to help cleanse a space. To make a smudge stick, simply bundle up a few springs, tie with string and let it dry out before burning.



You will need:

- A few springs of juniper (with or without berries)
- Water
- A large bowl

ID Tips: A fairly low and scrubby tree, Juniper has prickly needles in thick clumps on woody branches. Its berries start off green, maturing to dark purple, almost black in their second year. Be sure not to confuse it with yew, which has flat glossy needles growing in opposite pairs and pink berries.

N.B as Juniper is declining in some areas, please only take what you need and from places where there are many Juniper trees together.

Make a simple infusion of juniper leaves and/or berries by slowly simmering in hot water for around 10 minutes. Strain and cool.

In a large bowl, big enough to submerge your hands, combine 500ml of juniper infusion with hot water (make it as hot as you can) and soak hands (or feet, if you wish) for 15 minutes. Repeat twice daily.

This recipe was taken from 'The Herbal Book of Making and Taking' by Christopher Hedley and Non Shaw. Highly recommended if you are interested in making your own herbal medicines.



Wood Avens Spiced Apple Juice

ID Tips: Wood avens is a perennial herb, meaning it grows back from the same root stock year after year. In winter, only the basal leaves (those closest to the ground and roots) are left, and this is what we are looking for. The terminal leaves (those at the tip of the stem) are large and 3 lobed, there are then 2 or 3 smaller pairs of leaflets along the stem. Several of these stems radiate from the central root forming a 'basal rosette'.

Wood avens, also known as herb bennet, is a common perennial herb. It loves shady places and is often found on verges, the edges of woodlands and even in your garden. In summer, it grows a tall stem with yellow flowers. As the flowers fruit, they grow a seed head covered in tiny burs which will attach themselves to passing animals to disperse.

Perhaps wood avens' most interesting feature however is the roots. They contain a source of eugenol, also known as clove oil.

The roots and aerial parts are edible and the young leaves can be added to salads in Spring. In autumn and winter, it's the roots we are collecting to take advantage of the clove flavour and use it to create a lovely spiced drink.

At this stage, I do need to point out that it is technically illegal to dig up the roots of any plant without permission from the landowner. Wood avens grows abundantly (often referred to as a 'weed') and if you are just collecting a couple of plants, it's likely no one will mind, but it is still wise to make sure you are not going to upset anyone by digging up their land.



The root system of wood avens is made up of a large rhizome and lots of fine hair-like roots. Find a plant, clear the area so you can see the full plant and then carefully dig around the centre to release the roots, gently pulling them up. Give them a shake and take home to wash. Remember to cover back over the hole you made and leave no trace of your being there.

You will need:

- Apple juice
- 3 Wood Avens Roots
- Hogweed seeds (optional)
- Rosehips (optional)

Thoroughly wash your wood avens roots. As the roots are quite fine, you need to take care. Soaking and then using a nail brush to gently remove the mud is the best way (repeat this process a couple of times if needed). The roots can be used fresh or dried.

- Other additional extras such as pine needles, orange slices, ginger, cinnamon sticks

Place a pan of apple juice on the stove, add all the roots and other spices/fruit and slowly warm. Allow to mull for at least 10 minutes but longer will do no harm.

Strain, serve and enjoy!



Winter Teas

With much less in the way of fresh leaves and flowers in winter, tea making turns to evergreens, brown leaves and fungi!

Here are a couple of ideas to try. As always, gather responsibly, only take what you need and leave no trace.

A note on safety. Please be 100% sure that you have correctly identified the plant you are gathering, if you have any doubts, then either check with someone who knows, or leave it where it grows. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, it is best to avoid foraged teas unless you have taken the advice of a medicinal herbalist. Always try a small sip and wait a few moments before going all in with a new plant. This will give you time to savour that first taste, but also check for any reactions.

Birch polypore

This distinctive bracket fungus grows only on birch trees, as the name suggests. Pure white underneath and light brown on top, it's easy to identify. This fungi has myriad uses. It is anti-bacterial, anti-inflammatory, anti-viral and immune boosting. You can even cut small pieces from it to use as plasters to cover cuts.

To use in tea, collect a fresh polypore (look for a clean, white underside with no signs of nibbling by other creatures). Remove the outer layer of skin and then slice into thin pieces. These pieces can be used fresh, but I like to dry them out on a radiator or in the airing cupboard. Once dried, they can be powdered using a grinder, or chopped roughly. Add about 2 teaspoons to around 300ml of water and simmer slowly for around 30mins to release the goodness.

Warning - the taste of birch polypore is quite bitter! You may want to add some other flavours, such as ginger to take the edge off, or mix in some honey. This is a great tea to take daily when you feel a cold coming on.

Pine Needle and Rose Hip

Altogether better tasting and still full of goodness, pine needles can be gathered all year round. Rosehips also remain on the bare branches of dog rose well into winter and are a valuable source of vitamin c (but also, food for birds, so only take a few!).

Gather your needles and hips, chop them roughly and infuse in just boiled water for about 10 minutes. Strain through a muslin cloth (this is important! Rosehips contain tiny hairs which can irritate your throat, a sieve alone won't be enough to make sure they are all gone). Add honey, or perhaps a little rosehip syrup and enjoy.

