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# VeroBeach

## *Magazine*®

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*Our leaves may not change color in Vero Beach,  
but we'll help you get into the Thanksgiving spirit  
with three amazing autumn dishes*

### BUTTERNUT & BEYOND

FOR PLANT EXPERT MICHAEL BALL, NATURE IS BOTH  
A PANTRY AND A MEDICINE CABINET

# Green Is Good

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY PATRICK MERRELL

If you watched TV in the 1970s, you'll likely remember the name Euell Gibbons. An outdoorsman who promoted eating wild foods, Gibbons rose to national fame with his surprise bestseller, "Stalking the Wild Asparagus." Soon he was appearing on talk shows and pitching Grape-Nuts cereal. In one commercial, he asked, "Ever eat a pine tree? Many parts are edible."

What was his appeal? This excerpt from Gibbons' "Asparagus" book gets at the heart of it: "We live in a vastly complex society which has been able to provide us with a multitude of material things, and this is good, but ... don't we sometimes feel that we are living a secondhand sort of existence, and that we are in

danger of losing all contact with the origins of life and the nature which nourishes it?"

A quick trip to the grocery store for a bag of nuts or a pint of berries has replaced a walk into the wild to forage for those same foods. It's convenient and, let's face it, necessary given our busy lifestyles, but maybe not as satisfying as some of us would like. Nature has been put at a distance, enjoyed in small doses outside the day-to-day demands of our civilized world.

That was the reality for many people already back in Gibbons' day. And it still is for many today. Perhaps the disconnect has even increased. In our era of online technology and the constant monitoring









Michael Ball leads a group through the Environmental Learning Center's 64 acres, pointing out the medicinal uses for many of the wild plants that grow there.

of cellphones for text messages, emails and the latest news and tweets, many people feel even more out of touch with nature.

Interestingly, scientists have found some potential benefits to spending more time in natural environments. In 1984, the biologist and naturalist E.O. Wilson put forth his "biophilia hypothesis," which he defined as "the urge to affiliate with other forms of life." According to Wilson, that preference is something our bodies and minds innately respond to in a positive way. In 2014, research conducted at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, supported that idea, suggesting that

being more connected with nature can lead to improvements in mood, cognition, and health. Other studies have demonstrated increases in problem-solving abilities, creativity and memory test performance, each induced by spending more time in the great outdoors.

The Japanese have even coined a term to describe the calming effects of nature: *shinrin-yoku*. That translates as "forest bathing," and a 2010 study showed that spending time in a forest environment reduced stress in a number of measurable ways, such as lower blood pressure and a lower pulse rate.

We're lucky here in Indian River County with so many parks and beaches offering up Florida's natural beauty on a year-round basis. One vibrant oasis is the Environmental Learning Center. Situated on Wabasso Island in the Indian River Lagoon, its 64 acres were set aside for the express purpose of getting people more in touch with the local flora and fauna. The center offers numerous programs, including an edible and medicinal plant walk led by Michael Ball at various times throughout the year.

Ball is a self-taught botanical expert who grew up in Vero Beach and now lives nearby. He currently works as a consultant and naturalist for the Rare Plant Conservation Program at Bok Tower Gardens in Lake Wales, about an hour and a half west of Vero Beach. Ball's expertise and intimate knowledge of Florida plants makes him valuable for monitoring, rescuing and restoring native species as well as identifying plants and performing surveys.

"I started studying plants 52 years ago, when I was 13 years old," Ball says. One of his neighbors was

a full-blooded Seminole who shared her knowledge of the native plants that grew nearby. His home was at 12th Street and 66th Avenue in Vero Beach, when the area was a combination of wilderness, citrus groves and a few homes — in other words, a great spot for foraging. “I was eating the weeds behind my parents’ backs when they would go away,” Ball says. “I’d have my own little pan I’d use and cook things up.”

In addition, he made trips to the local library to feed his love of science and medicine. “I would stay up late studying this stuff,” he says, adding, “I couldn’t wait to go to the doctor so I could have conversations with him.” That interest turned into a lifelong career in botany. “Plants — that’s been my whole life,” he says. “When conservation bites, it doesn’t let go.”

Perhaps the most immersive “back-to-nature” segment of Ball’s life was the nine years he spent living near Blue Cypress Lake. Employed at a nursery that grew saw palmettos and wax myrtles, he asked if he could live in an Airstream trailer that had been used as a field office. The nursery said yes. His home had no air conditioning or heating, and the bulk of his diet came from the wild plants he collected in the woods surrounding the trailer. That was supplemented by a few grocery store purchases: olive oil, which he liked, and beans and tempeh (an Asian soy product) for protein. That’s life in the wild as few have experienced it. No rent, no electricity bills, and nature’s grocery store right outside your front door.

Cheryl Peterson, the manager of the Rare Plant Conservation Program at Bok Tower Gardens, considers



Seminole Indians used roots of the coontie, after removing natural toxins, to make bread. The leaves continue to be the sole food source for larvae of the rare *Atala* butterfly, native to Southeast Florida. Collection of coontie from the wild is prohibited.

Ball’s “old knowledge” especially valuable, describing him as a “hidden treasure of Vero.” She elaborates, “There aren’t people like that anymore, because all that native and indigenous knowledge — and people who have actually learned by doing that as a way of life — that’s been lost. It’s all through schools now and through books.” While scientific training is important, she says, “His knowledge is unique. It’s different than what you’d get if you said, ‘I’m going to go get a Ph.D. in botany.’ That’s going to be different than what Mike knows, but I can’t say it’s going to be better.”



1. CONSULT AN EXPERT
2. ONLY SAMPLE
3. GET PERMISSION
4. PROTECT YOUR PETS

Let's take a closer look at a few of the plants on Michael Ball's walk on the Environmental Learning Center's grounds. But before we do, here are four important warnings about sampling anything growing in the wild:

1. "It's always important to get an expert to identify a plant," Ball advises. Make sure you know what you're eating and what its effects might be. Some plants have harmful look-alikes.
2. "Enjoy a wild blueberry," Ball says. "But if you want blueberries, they sell them at the store. We're encroaching upon animals all the time. It's just not fair if we're out there eating their food too."
3. Permission is required to take something that's growing on public land. Additionally, some Florida plants are protected.
4. A number of local plants are toxic to pets (and people).



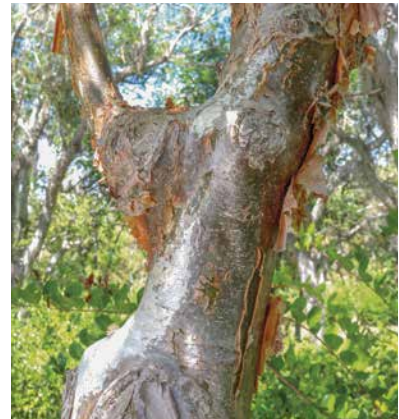
#### WILD COFFEE

These plants thrive in the Florida climate, but don't try making a cup of coffee from the berry seeds. It won't taste like coffee or contain any caffeine. More importantly, little is known about the chemistry of this plant, and many varieties are considered toxic.



#### PRICKLY PEAR CACTUS

Eating the pads, after the spines have been removed, can lower the blood sugar for people whose blood sugar is high. They taste a bit like green pepper. The pulp inside the pads is excellent for burns, much the same as aloe vera. Gopher tortoises love the fruit.



#### GUMBO LIMBO

This is also known as the "tourist tree," since its bark resembles peeling sunburned skin. Ball says the leaves are a great anti-inflammatory and can help stimulate the immune system. Young leaves are edible, while older leaves can be crushed and made into a tea. In large doses, however, it can cause vomiting.



#### SALTWORT AND GLASSWORT

Both of these plants are considered delicacies and have a pleasantly salty flavor. The texture is crisp and juicy, and glasswort is high in protein.



#### BEAUTYBERRY

This makes a beautiful-looking jam. But make sure to add sugar, as the berries are bitter.



#### SEA GRAPE

The fruit is great for jams. In South America the leaves are used for treating diabetes, while the early Spanish explorers used them as playing cards.





#### COONTIE

The root of this slow-growing plant has been used as a starchy food for 14,000 years. Although once plentiful in Florida, it was nearly wiped out during World War I. One supplier alone harvested 100 tons of wild coontie a day to feed U.S. soldiers. Caution: If not prepared properly, it will retain cyanide compounds.



#### PLANTAIN (PLANTAGO)

This small, scraggly native plant bears no resemblance to the true plantains that produce a large, banana-like fruit. The leaves can help heal wounds and draw out splinters or venom from bites. Just chew or crush the leaf and apply it to the problem area.



#### LIVE OAK TREES

Acorns are edible once the tannins have been leached out by soaking them in water. They were once an important source of food and oil for the local Indians. Ground up, they become an acorn flour that can be used to make pancakes. For stings and bites, chew an oak leaf and then apply it as a poultice.



#### PASSIONFLOWER

According to Ball, tea made from these leaves can help combat anxiousness or trouble sleeping, since it is said to lower "mental chatter."



#### WILLOW

"The plant works better as a whole than aspirin," says Ball. "There are many more antioxidants and anti-inflammatories aside from salicylic acid." Just split a twig with a knife and peel the bark back. ☘

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