

Survival Skills: Finding Wild Edible Plants in Winter - [4](#)
by [Tim MacWelch](#)



Despite the cold winter weather, and contrary to what you would expect, the winter landscape does contain a decent number of wild edible plants throughout the frosty season.

A personal favorite of mine, the persimmon fruit is one of the best tasting things in winter, that is if you can beat the animals to this dwindling crop. As the temperatures turn colder, these orange-colored fruits sweeten and become even more attractive to wildlife. Here in Virginia, I still find them hanging on the tree in January; but once they turn from bitter to sweet, the supply disappears quickly.

Another great winter edible plant part is the wild rose hip. These red fruits don't have much inside them besides the indigestible seeds; however, the skin and a little bit of pulp contain a significant amount of vitamin C and a good sweet flavor. The pulp often reminds me of fruit leather and apples.

Another vitamin C powerhouse is the pine needle. Positively identify pine, chop up a tablespoon of needles, and soak them in scalding hot water for ten minutes to get 4 to 5 times your daily requirement of "C." Just make sure you skip the loblolly pine and ponderosa pine, as these may be toxic. And don't consume pine needle tea if you are pregnant, as it may cause premature birth. If you have an abundance of pine and a shortage of food, the bark can be eaten too, as we mentioned in [a previous post](#).

Craving a salad? No problem. There are numerous greens that can be found in winter. Many of them even taste better during the shorter days and cold weather. Wild onion, various cresses and wild mustards can add a lot of flavor to a meal in the wild, or a meal at home.

Don't forget the root crops as wild edibles. If the ground isn't frozen too hard to dig, you can look for a few frost-hardy leaves to point you toward burdock, wild carrot, thistle and other earthy-tasting roots. Just be careful what you dig, and make sure you have a 100-percent positive match for the edible plant you are foraging. Some roots, like poison hemlock and fool's parsley, are deadly poisonous.

But don't let a few bad plants scare you away from gathering wild foods. Just take a respectable field guide with you, and use it. My top recommendation is Peterson's Field Guide to Edible Wild Plants. Although it is advertised as an eastern plant book, it works well on the West Coast, too. In fact, many of the plants in this book are non-native to America, and are scattered across the globe.

Tell us about your favorite wild plant to eat in winter in the comments.

Survival Foods: Can You Really Eat Tree Bark? - [3](#)
by [Tim MacWelch](#)



Yes, you can eat tree bark as a safe and nutritious wild food--as long as you are using the right part of the bark from the right species of tree. And to clarify, we are not talking about the crusty, corky grey part of the bark. The bark section of choice for food is the cambium layer, which lies right next to the wood.

Plenty of our ancestors used this edible inner layer of tree bark as both food and medicine. Many Native American cultures included the inner bark of pines and other trees as an important staple of their diet. This use was so common in some areas that early explorers visiting North America recorded acres of trees stripped of bark for food by the locals.

In Sweden and Finland, Pine bark bread has been made for centuries from rye flour, with the toasted and ground inner layer of pine bark added. The Sami people of northern Europe used large sheets of Pine bark that were peeled from the trees in springtime, dried out and stored for use as a staple food throughout the year. This bark was reportedly consumed fresh, dried or roasted to a crisp.

Inner tree bark can be obtained in large amounts year round, just by "skinning" a single tree, or by taking advantage of living limbs that have broken off during storms. The bark is relatively nutritious, packing about 500-600 calories to the pound, but it may be bitter tasting depending on the species and the tree's growing conditions. Most inner bark contains a surprising amount of digestible starches, some sugar, vitamins, minerals, and the bark also has tons of fiber, so brace yourself for a good internal scrubbing.

At least one Native tribe is well known for making bark an important part of their daily diet. There is a tribe in the mountains of upstate New York called the "Adirondack", and that name translates to "bark eaters" from the Iroquois language.

Which Trees Have An Edible Bark?

Trees on the edible inner bark list include most of the Pines, Slippery Elm, Black Birch, Yellow Birch, Red Spruce, Black Spruce, Balsam Fir and Tamarack.

Of all the contenders, Pine seems to be the genus of choice around the Northern Hemisphere, being used the most by our forebears. In fact, most species of Pine in North America should be considered "edible plants". The inner bark and Pine nuts can be eaten as food. A spoonful of chopped Pine needles can be steeped in a cup of hot water for 10 minutes to make Pine Needle Tea, which is a Vitamin C powerhouse (one cup of tea containing as much as 5 times your daily requirement).

Warning: Pine Needle Tea, and eating Pine needles, may be harmful to unborn babies--so find something else to snack on if you have a bun in the oven. Also, there is some question about toxins in the needles of the western Ponderosa Pine and the southeastern Loblolly Pine, so these two should be avoided for tea.

Harvest and Preparation

This first job is to positively identify the tree species with a reputable tree book, or an actual tree expert.

Next, we need to shave off the grey, outer bark; and the greenish middle layer of bark; to get down to the rubbery, white or cream colored inner layer. If you shave too deeply, you'll feel the difference between the tree wood and bark. The bark feels much softer. The tree wood is hard and seems slick to your knife blade. Cut and peel off the whitish, rubbery inner bark. This is what you are after.

If you would like to fry the bark to eat it now, you can use the bark fresh from the tree. Just fry the bark strips for a few minutes on each side, in a pan with a few spoons of oil, until it becomes crispy. I like to call this "Bark Jerky", which is a close estimate of the texture, but not the flavor. Pine bark tastes like Pine sawdust, because it pretty much is sawdust, so you'll want to find creative ways to blend it into other foods so that it goes down easier.

If you want to make flour from the bark, or just save it for later, the next step is to process the bark by drying it. Drying the bark in the sun on a rack or on a flat rock is your best bet, if you are not using the bark right away. It should take about a day to dry the bark strips, depending on the weather and the bark strip size. Once dried, you can create the fabled pine bark flour, which actually resembles oatmeal more than wheat flour. If you want to go old school, you can grind up the dried bark between two stones, but a faster way is to drop pieces in a blender or food chopper. Pulse the device to powder the bark, and then store it in a cool dark place.

Pine Bark Cookies

Gain a massive amount of "trail cred" by breaking out some Pine Bark cookies on your next hunt or hike. An easy path to success is to modify your favorite oatmeal cookie recipe, by switching half of the oatmeal for Pine bark flour. My family recipe for oatmeal cookies is normally 2 cups of quick cook dry oatmeal, so I just drop that to one cup of oatmeal and add one cup of Pine bark flour for a chewy and piney, yet strangely delectable treat. Give it a try, and let us know if you liked Pine bark or one of the other edible barks, by leaving us a comment.