

You'd be surprised at what is right on your doorstep we were

Wild food man Mark putting foraging in Galloway back on the menu

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SELF-sufficiency has become a way of life for many, with some keen enthusiasts viewing it as important as self-preservation.

This can be seen in the emergence of trends such as guerrilla gardening, the uptake and resurgence of allotments, the increase in smallholdings and small, local suppliers — all confirmation that we as a society are starting to care more about fending for ourselves.

It is also evidence that people care about where their food originates, how it is produced and by what process; the average Joe is becoming more willing to pay that bit more for quality, ethical, sustainable produce and not just

bang for their buck.

Others are taking it a step further — why pay for some foods at all? We are surrounded by so much natural produce, that we often unwittingly walk past a garnish, salad, vegetable every day.

"I found three edible species in the raised beds across from your office," Mark Williams told me at the front desk of the Free Press office.

In fact it was six — wavy bittercress, dandelion, Japanese rose, nettles, plantain and chickweed all in the raised beds on St Andrew Street, Stranraer.

I was a little sceptical about trying these plants pulled from the ground in such a built up, busy, urban area but, plucking up the courage, I enjoyed my miniature appetisers. Even better I



Mark's foraging classes take members of the public out into the countryside to find hidden treasures.

felt no ill effects later in the day.

"I started going mushroom foraging when I was about 19 and I used to go out with a chef between shifts to see what we could find," Mark, founder of Galloway Wild Foods revealed. "You learn skills along the way and find out what to look for, and what to avoid."

With a passion for foraging and a love of all food you can gather for free, Mark offers guided walks and tuition on woodland, hedgerow and coastal foraging.

His obsession with all things 'foodie' has led to jobs as a fisherman, smoker, chef, forager and now a dairymaid.

Having led forays for the National Trust and RSPB, he has even written cookery and wild food columns for various national publications.

Originally from Arran, Mark moved to the region almost seven years ago and now works up to 60 hours a week with Rowan Glen.

"I cover most of Dumfries and Galloway and some of Ayrshire; it's good because my job puts me in touch with a lot of suppliers and food people, so I make great contacts."

And despite the long days, if not week, the 41-year-old admits his passion offers a great sense of relaxation.

He added: "Last week I had five days work with Rowan Glen then I was out for the weekend foraging and putting on demonstrations of cooking with the finds.

"Sometimes I get the bus home from work and I'll walk to the house from the bus stop. The other day I got off the bus and my wife wasn't there. I was disappointed but as I walked home I kept finding different little ingredients — it completely relaxes me and winds me down.

"By the time I got home I was in a great mood and all of a sudden I couldn't care that I had to walk from the bus stop. Foraging can be very satisfying."

A trained mountain leader with 13 years service in Arran and Galloway Mountain Rescue Teams, Mark says he is "a reasonably safe pair of hands", having saved more people than he has killed — he jokes; "none, honestly."

Now deeply into his own adventure, Mark's Wild Food Guide introduces the vast array of wild foods the region

has to offer, providing recipe pages that offer inspiration on what to do with findings. Perhaps more importantly, his website highlights the poisonous species.

"Galloway is a forager's paradise," he says. "Its mild, damp climate and wide variety of habitats, offer the perfect growing conditions for all manner of delicious flora, fauna and fungi — there are few places in Britain offering such an ideal environment for learning to forage."

Now confident enough in his own abilities, the Gatehouse of Fleet-based family man started leading expeditions a few years ago after being asked to lead a forage in Kirroughtree by Savour the Flavours.

"About 60-70 people turned up and I had a great response. I don't think it's so much a romanticism about sourcing your own food, more that people are recognising pre-packaged food can often be rubbish.

"There's definitely a personal responsibility to support local, small producers and to be sustainable in what we eat. But wild food does a lot of that and ticks a lot of boxes. It's more than just a walk; you can go a walk and come back with enough food for a meal."

Foraging has not only become trendy and a favoured past time amongst households, but the produce is the envy and desire of world-class restaurants.

On one hand foragers like Mark can find everyday ingredients for the larder or for cooking. But on the other hand they can source high-end value wild food that restaurants would "kill to get their hands on".

The Noma restaurant in Copenhagen — voted the best restaurant in the world three years in a row — are ardent believers and users of wild food.

Mark told us: "I've supplied and worked with chefs such as Andrew Feeley and the chef at the Glen App Castle. A number of Michelin star chefs want to do pop-up restaurants with me.

"We are seeing a lot of chefs using ingredients that they can't really get anywhere else, they can't get them at suppliers or the shops. Ingredients like sea sandwort. Galloway is a brilliant place to do this.



Cooking his finds on Cardoness beach.

"The great thing about wild food is it's free, so you can get the ingredients to make a meal you might see at a millionaire's gourmet dinner. It's a very inclusive way of eating."

This is an extension of what Mark already provides, taking people out to forage before serving them a six-course meal of what they have gathered.

"I did a meal the other weekend with 50 ingredients I had gathered within 20 miles of my home. It doesn't have to be hard work — within ten minutes of my front door I can get 200 different species of wild foods every year.

"The other week we were having fish and chips in the house and I realised we didn't have any tartare sauce. I nipped out the front door, collected a few ingredients and came back and was able to make a wild tartare sauce."

Around 99.9 per cent of all wild foods are untouched, it's a totally untapped resource.

The rarest thing Mark has found is an oyster plant, which grows on rocky shores and he says is very succulent,

with a "really concentrated flavour".

"It's pretty expensive as well — you could expect to pay top dollar for that in some places. I have found truffles in Galloway, but they are inedible to humans. Deer truffles. Truffles tend to grow in quite chalky soil and we don't get that here — but a truffle is one of the things on my list to find.

"If you get small, firm ceps that haven't taken on a lot of water, then you could expect to pay £20 per kilo."

To find out more about Galloway Wild Foods, the expeditions Mark offers, the legality and responsibilities foragers have to adhere to and tasty recipes, go to his website www.gallowaywildfoods.com

You can also follow him on Twitter at @markwildfood.

A little disclaimer for you — Mark is an experienced forager and under no circumstances should you eat anything found wild unless you are 100 per cent sure that it is safe to do so. It may be cheap but the ultimate cost could be very pricey if incorrect.



His latest finds look good enough to eat.



It may be a truffle but these uncovered deer truffles are inedible.



Oyster plants make a tasty treat.