

April and May is the perfect time to forage for Alexanders (*Smyrniium olusatrum*), a wild food which grows on cliff tops and in seaside hedgerows.



The Romans called it the ‘pot herb of Alexandria’ because every part of it is edible. People say it tastes similar to angelica and parsley, but there are many different ways of bringing out its flavour.

Alexanders, also known as horse parsley, grows on cliff tops and in seaside hedgerows. In the spring it produces yellow-green flowers and, in the autumn, black seeds. It grows to a height of 50 to 120cms with a hollow and grooved stem.

Avoid picking plants which may be dirty or polluted. For example, pick from areas away from the road. Also, don’t gather from low down along a path, where dogs or livestock may have brushed past. Don’t forage straight after a heavy rainfall, when plants in the ground – and shellfish – may be contaminated with run-off from the fields, which can contain chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Always give your leaves, flowers, fruit, nuts and roots a good wash before use.

To prepare the stalks cut sections of the thickest part removing the bamboo like dividing segments away. Peel the stringy outer layer off and that’s it you are ready to go. You can steam it and treat it like Asparagus, you can treat it like celery and use it as a main ingredient or to enrich stocks and soups with its wonderful aromatic flavour. Alexanders also have an amazing affinity with fish so you could stuff a fish with the leaves or steam it Japanese style on the stalks.

Recipes

1 Fresh stems, flowers and leaves

To enjoy these as a fresh vegetable – similar to asparagus – try peeling the stems and boiling them for five to ten minutes, or until tender. Do the same with unripe flower heads, or eat them raw.

Larger leaves can be blanched briefly, while younger ones can be eaten raw.

2 Tempura flower heads

Both the ripe and unripe flower heads can be dipped in tempura batter and deep fried until golden, Japanese style.

3 Roasted roots

Scrub, peel and slice the roots – much like you would with parsnips – toss them in sunflower oil, season, then roast at 180 degrees Celsius for 20 minutes or so, until tender. Remember, you mustn’t dig up plants without the landowner’s permission.