

Incredible Edibles

HAWLEY, MASS.—

If you are ever marooned on a desert island with no food in sight, the first thing you should wish is to have Russ Cohen there. Forget coconuts. He could make soup from flakes of palm bark and some tender young fronds.

“A fine substitute for spinach,” he might say. He could tap the palm for drinking water and boil some of the sap into sweet syrup. Using a stick to probe the sand at the base of the tree, he might unearth rare palm truffles that grow only around the roots of that particular species.

Short of Cohen in the flesh, the next thing you should wish is that you had taken one of his foraging walks or workshops, in which he pokes around doing exactly this kind of thing on more familiar turf the Fens in Boston, say, or a state park on the North Shore teaching people what he knows. Even when you are not marooned there, it’s a great way to get to know a place.

“Aha,” says Cohen, 47, stopping to pluck a 10-inch-long rippled leaf from a clump at the edge of a field in Western Massachusetts, where he is leading such a walk for the Franklin Land Trust. He straightens, twirling the leaf. “Curly dock,” he announces. “When the leaves are smaller, you can blanch them for 30 seconds and substitute them for stinging nettle in cream of nettle soup.”

Whoa.



By Jane Roy Brown
Globe Correspondent

Photograph by Bill Regan

He has already coaxed the small band of walkers to taste some ratty-looking wild mustard flowers (the entire plant is edible), and yes, the pale-yellow blooms have a pleasing, radishy snap. And he has informed us that the stems of invasive Japanese knotweed contain a cholesterol-lowering chemical and make a tasty rhubarb replacement, as in strawberry-knotweed pie. (“Eat up!,” he says. “This plant is devouring the Northeast landscape.”)

As for the spire of evening primrose he waved before the group, it springs from a starchy root, which, if harvested at the right time, can be grated to make facsimile potato pancakes. But cream of stinging nettle soup? The circle of pursed lips lets him know it’s a leap.

Cohen smiles. He is accustomed to seeing wrinkled noses as well as wide-eyed delight. In the introduction to his book, “Wild Plants I Have Known . . . and Eaten” (Essex County Greenbelt Association, 2004), Cohen acknowledges that he put off the writing because he prefers the experience of teaching in the field, where he can savor....