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Dandelion Salads: For Those Who Like to Eat on the Wild Side

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I love the idea of a spring tonic. After a winter of roots, grains and deer jerky, the human species emerges from its smoky cave to forage greens from the wild.

Herbaceous plants such as stinging nettle and sheep sorrel offer up their mineral-rich stores. Do these wild treasures really unkink the digestive system as if it were a stored hose? Will a salad of them flush the liver of toxins, as their proponents assure us? Who knows? But when it comes to vitamins and minerals, I?ll bet they hold their own against garden powerhouses such as spinach and collards. Sure, I have these domestic crops growing happily in my home plot. But it?s fun to go out and gather those wilder greens when they?re still young and tender, and taste their best.

Look at the effect they have on hens. Our flock has celebrated spring by running around the farm to scratch for bugs and devour greenery. Not only are they laying like mad, the yolks are an even brighter orange than ever, thanks to the extra calcium and carotenes that abundant greens provide. And we don?t feed ours yellow dye ? or even marigold petals ? to give them that hue. Find a good local egg supplier at a farmers market and she or he will likely tell you a similar story.

But weeds are not just for the birds. Dandelions can be quite a treat for us as well. (Avoid eating any weeds sprayed with chemicals.) I used to scorn dandelions because so many I?d been served were tough, stringy and bitter, no matter how well doctored with garlic, bacon or honey. Maybe they?d been picked too mature, or they were the horticultural type called Italian dandelions, which are really a type of chicory.

Seeking the perfect dandelion is a bit of an art, but at least I was spoiled for choice. There were some right along the foundation of the house, and everywhere else on the property for that matter, getting ready to spangle the lawn with yellow and drill their taproots into the centers of daylily clumps. I snipped only those with soft, succulent leaves less than four inches long. Tasting a few, I could find no trace of bitterness.

I filled individual salad bowls with them and tossed them with a light vinaigrette, coarse salt, cracked pepper and the new shoots of tarragon and chives emerging in the herb garden.

But they needed something more. So I went out to the henhouse and grabbed some eggs, which I soft-boiled for about four minutes, aiming for firm whites and runny yolks. When they were just cool enough to touch I peeled them ? a delicate maneuver but not impossible. Then I spread two of them open atop each bowl of greens, where they oozed forth their orange-gold hue, as if the plants had erupted in flowers.

Now purslane and other summer forages are upon us. But for a moment there, dandelion-fed hen, hen-made egg and egg found a nest in a dandelion bowl. A salute to spring.

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The Art of a Dandelion Salad

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