

BOOK REVIEW

LEDA MEREDITH. 2019. **The Skillful Forager**. (ISBN-13: 978-1-61180-483-6, pbk). Roost Books, 4720 Walnut Street, Boulder, Colorado 80301, U.S.A. (**Orders:** roostbooks.com). \$24.95 US, 283 pp, index, 6½" × 9".

The number of foraging guides has surged in recent years—a growing interest in the natural world, at the very time this world is in serious ecological trouble. This poses a unique challenge. As habitats shrink and organisms become endangered, more people are seeking the remaining edible plants, attempting to reconnect with nature or experiment with new tastes, textures and flavors.

The Skillful Forager is a product of this millennium, reflecting current concerns such as sustainability. It adds some interesting wrinkles to help those who would like to safely sample wild foods. Foraging today is largely an urban conceit, engaged in for any number of reasons, most of which are valid. Perhaps the most important is encouraging closer observation of the natural world. The author's extensive experience with teaching foraging has generated many helpful suggestions, not only for the beginner, but the veteran forager as well. It includes detailed harvesting techniques; the best time to harvest; which part of the plant is most useful; keeping the harvest fresh; and methods of preparation for the table. A few of these are very detailed, such as making acorn flour, while the majority are perfunctory.

Safety is a significant issue and there is the usual disclaimer of the need for confident identification. The excellent photographs are somewhat helpful, while the plant descriptions are brief. More detailed references should be consulted for plant identification. Common toxic look-alikes are described, and warnings are prominently displayed. One might argue that more circumspection is required for some plants, as well as a warning not to overindulge. For example there are at least 150 species of milkweed in the USA. Only *Asclepias syriaca* is described, while a number of the others can cause unpleasant health effects due to the cardiac glycosides.

The book's organization is unique, each section focusing on a specific part of a plant—leaf, roots, bark, berries, etc. This presumes that one has already correctly identified the particular plant. The book's strength is its emphasis on techniques for collecting, preparation, and ethics. Taste is very personal, and Meredith is exuberant in her praise for most of the plants described. Others might not be so enthusiastic. Regardless, the book is engaging and readable.

While some plants have a cosmopolitan distribution, many are confined to a local habitat. This book will be most helpful for those foraging in the northeast. Regional guides can be especially important and are mandatory for those who collect mushrooms for the table, as toxicity for the same species may differ from one location to another.

No general foraging guide can replace my treasured *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* (Euell Gibbons), now yellowing with age and dog-eared from use. It was the gateway book to foraging for many. Some recent additions to this genre have their place on the bookshelf or in a backpack. For those in the Northeast *The Skillful Forager* is one of them, alongside specific books for plant and mushroom identification.—*Denis R. Benjamin, Resident Research Associate, Botanical Research Institute of Texas, Fort Worth, Texas, U.S.A.*