



Wild Leek

(*Allium tricoccum*)

By Thomas Adessa

Photos by Jaqueline Donnelly

For some, the first sign of spring is the purple flower of the crocus as it peeks up through the barren ground. For others, it's hearing songbirds voicing their unique melodies. Still for others—such as myself—it is the appearance of ramps. That's right: ramps, or what's more commonly referred to as the wild leek.

My first exposure to leeks was from my scoutmaster. On a spring camping trip we were learning about wild plant identification. The scoutmaster showed us leeks and that same evening we tried them three different ways: in a soup, raw, and the entire plant cooked. The experience remains with me to this day.

On the eastern seaboard, this perennial plant is primarily found from late winter through spring, from Quebec to South Carolina. It has smooth, long, light-green leaves that are similar in appearance to those of tulips. The scallion-like stalk and upper section of the bulb may also have a burgundy tint. All parts of the plant—

leaves and bulb—are edible. Wild leeks grow in clumps of a few to several dozen plants and have a strong root structure that can make them difficult to dig when the soil is dry.

Two varieties of wild leeks call New York State home. *Allium tricoccum* var. *tricoccum* has broad leaves and is the species most people encounter. *Allium tricoccum* var. *burdickii* (also known as Burdick’s wild leek) has narrow leaves and is endangered in this state, only known to occur in Chautauqua County.

The leek’s flavor is a combination of garlic and onion and lends itself to a variety of cooking applications—from soups and toppings, to chopped and added to sauces; or you can sauté the entire plant. It can even be pickled! It has become a delicacy in many trendy restaurants. But, natives of New York, Pennsylvania, and several other eastern states down to South Carolina have known about the leek’s many uses for decades. In many Appalachian states it is considered to be a spring tonic—originally labeled as such because before mass shipping and refrigeration, leeks were the first vegetable available in the spring.

Several states hold festivals that focus on leeks. For example, in Richmond, West Virginia, an annual “Ramp Fest” brings leek lovers from long distances to



Wild leek leaves wither away by the end of spring when a flower stalk emerges. The flowers bloom in mid-summer for a couple weeks, and then the seeds mature and fall.

sample various foods that feature wild leeks. Unfortunately, the plant’s popularity as a culinary treat is beginning to take a toll on its populations. With the recent focus on eating locally, wild leeks are being harvested in record numbers. This has led to the plant being listed as a species of special concern in several eastern states. In Quebec, the leek is a threatened species and its harvesting is restricted. However, in New York State, wild leeks (all species except the narrowleaf variety) can currently be harvested. But with leek numbers

dwindling, it’s a good practice to only gather a small portion of a group of plants and leave others as rootstock for future plants.

Wild leeks are only available for a short time each spring. I look forward to their arrival and even gather a few for friends who can no longer navigate the woods. If you are lucky enough to have some of these flavorful plants on your property, be sure to try them, but leave some to enjoy in the future.

Thomas Adessa is a Central New York native and an avid lover of the outdoors.

Caution About Dangerous Look-alikes.

Readers take note: false hellebore (a poisonous plant) can be mistaken for wild leeks early in the season. ALWAYS positively identify any wild plant before ingesting it.



Roasted Leek Bread:

Clean one dozen leeks using just the bulb.
Roast in a glass-baking dish at 350°, with a little olive oil, until soft.
Cool. Place in a food processor with ¼ stick melted butter.
Puree, spread on Italian bread, and brown under a broiler.
Sprinkle on Parmesan cheese and enjoy!

Editor’s Note: For more delicious wild leek recipes from the author, visit our Facebook page!

