

# Weeds, your blight, my delight

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In Italy they've been doing it since time immemorial, and it's finally catching on here. I'm talking about eating wild plants – some call them weeds.

When I lived in Italy I'd see people in the countryside, bent over double and plucking away, always with a bag at their side. Overcome by curiosity, I approached one of them and peered into her bag – it was full of what seemed to be weeds. What are they for, I asked. Looking at me as though I lacked a certain mental nimbleness, the woman motioned towards her mouth. You eat them, she said. The tough ones you cook – and she pulled out something resembling a thistle – the others you eat raw. She drilled her finger into her cheek, Italian sign-language for delicious.

Had I misjudged the much-maligned weed? The etymology of the word failed to enlighten me. Weed derives from the Old English "woed," of unknown origin and is related to the Old High German "wiota," meaning fern.

But a different source generated the German word for weed – "Unkraut." It's composed of the negative prefix "un," and "Kraut" (from the Middle High German "krut"), meaning, among other things, herb. Literally, then "Unkraut," signifies not-herb. The Italian for weed, "malerba," is similarly formed, with the negative prefix "mal" (bad), and "erba," meaning herb, but also grass, formerly the name of a medicinal herb.

I thought I had a clue and checked the other dictionaries at hand – Dutch and French. The Dutch call the weed "onkruid," close to the German "Unkraut."

For the French it's "mauvaise herbe," like the Italian "malberba." What they have in common is herb.

So what does the dictionary say about herb? In general usage, herb applies to a plant used for food, medicine, flavour or scent. Some herbs, then, must have been given a negative connotation because they didn't fulfill these requirements. In fact, the Latin for weed is "herba inutilis," useless herb, or "herba iners," inert herb, both imputing an inadequate quality to the plant. Hence it all depends on our point of view – what is bad or useless to you might be good and desirable to me.

Several of the wild plants gathered in the Italian countryside, which can also be found here, may be considered by some as no better than a gate-crasher to a party – such as the dandelion. But pick it in an unpolluted place, and you'll find both its leaves and flowers are comestible. The leaves are tastiest, raw or sautéed, before the plant flowers; later, the flowers can be dipped in batter and fried (like zucchini flowers). And nettles (wear gloves to handle them), growing in undisturbed areas, are delicious both raw and cooked – the delicate, uppermost leaves in salads, omelettes or (an Italian favourite) as filling for ravioli; the larger leaves for soup or cooked like spinach.

In Florence, my favourite wild plant was "nepitella" (*calamintha nepeta*). A leaf or two added to mushrooms, zucchini and eggplant transforms their blandness into something sublime. I couldn't find "nepitella" here, so I sowed seeds. Now it's spreading fast – if you're tempted to say, just like a weed, I would remind you that it's here by invitation.