

# Wild Leeks are Welcome Sign of Spring

the forests' spicy gift



## Edible Forest

By Marty Kovarik

Each spring, even before the trees begin to bud, tender wild leeks begin to pop out of the woodland floor. The wild leek is a member of the lily family, and is closely related to onions, garlic and chives. They thrive in Michigan's moist, rich forest floors. Wild leeks, or ramps, were among the first delicacies Native Americans and settlers looked forward to each new year. Not only were they relished for their spiciness after a long bland winter diet, in many Native American and mountain cultures they were believed to have medicinal value.

The healthy feeling these early people received from eating leeks was not imagined. After their bodies were depleted of vitamins through the winter, leeks provided an important source of vitamins C and A to jump start them in the spring. Research also suggests that wild leeks have the same cholesterol reducing effect as garlic.

In spring, the wild leek consists of two to three broad deep green leaves which can grow a foot tall, a purplish stem and a pure white bulb. The entire plant is edible. As the forest canopy thickens, the leek leaves die and a single stalk produces a white flower in July. The leek bulbs can still be dug up throughout the summer and fall.

Leeks can be used in soups, stews, egg and potato dishes, or anywhere you want to add an onion/garlic flavor. Leeks can also be minced and added to burgers, or pickled. The milder leaves can be used in salads, dips, soups, or as a flavorful garnish.

Wild leeks are most pungent when eaten raw, and in fact are too pungent for most people's taste. Parboiling or sautéing tames their wildness.

When picking wild leeks, be selective and disrupt the forest floor as little as possible. Searching out the clumps with the thickest stalks will yield the larger leek bulbs. With your hand or a trowel, dig alongside of the clump until you can feel or see where the leek bulb is attached to the root. At this point, slide a dandelion or weed picker just below the bulb and push it under the leek to pop it off. When the best leeks from a bunch are picked, simply slide the dirt back in around the hole and move on.

To prepare the leeks for the table, strip off the dirty, papery layer and trim off the root below the bulb. Leek leaves should be used soon, but clean trimmed bulbs, covered in the refrigerator, will last a while. 🍴

## Vichyssoise

The wild leeks add a spicy note to this sometimes bland classic.

- 1 cup **wild leeks** (white part only) coarsely chopped
- 1 med **onion**, chopped
- 2 TBL **butter**
- 3 cups **chicken broth**
- 4 med **potatoes**, peeled and chopped
- dash **Tabasco or white pepper**
- 1 tsp **salt**
- 1 cup **heavy cream**
- leek** leaves, minced, for garnish

In a large saucepan, saute leeks and onion in butter until transparent.

Add chicken broth and potatoes. Simmer 30 - 45 minutes, until vegetables are mushy.

Pour the soup into a blender and blend until smooth. Return to pot, add Tabasco, salt and cream. Heat thoroughly, but do not boil. Garnish with fresh minced leek leaves.

