

# Wonder Weeds

By April Blazich



**L**OOKING FOR A WAY TO ADD some nutrition to your flock's diet without spending a ton? Outside your back door may be the treasure you are seeking and requires you to do no more than pick and wash!

When America was first settled, those who came here to homestead brought with them a supply of food, medicinal, and textile fiber seeds since they had no way of knowing what usable plants were available in the area they were settling. Many of these food plants were greens that could be grown and eaten during the leanest months of late winter and early spring. As it happens, some of them grew extremely well and gradually "escaped" from cultivated garden plots into the wild, their seeds borne on the wind or by marauding wildlife. Today millions of dollars per year are spent on eradicating some of the most nutritious of those food plants from our lawns and gardens!

Dandelions were used as a green leafy food crop, their flowers made into wine, roots into a coffee-like beverage, and the entire plant was used medicinally for a number of ailments. With the resurgence of interest in gourmet cuisine, seeds of true dandelions (*Taraxacum officinale*) and look-alike varieties of chicories (*Cichorium intybus*) are becoming more available, and so the circle is completed with the one-time food crop returning to the backyard garden plot. You can find the best quality dandelions during the colder months of the year. As the temperatures rise,

so does the bitterness in the leaves until even the critters will no longer eat them. Harvest the young leaves from areas where no chemicals have been applied for many months and away from sidewalks and streets where dogs may have soiled them. Wash them well to remove any animal contamination as well as any insects and dirt clinging to the leaves. They are excellent braised or used in soup as you would escarole, and will keep for several days in the refrigerator in a zip bag.

For the birds, feed sparingly, remembering that they are a whole lot smaller than we are, and a single leaf in comparison to their body size may be as large as a bushel of greens is to us. Also remember that these greens pack a ton of micronutrients and minerals as well as the standard vitamins A and C, so it is easy to overdo things. In his book, *Stalking the Healthful Herbs*, Euell Gibbons lists the nutritional values of dandelion greens as containing 2.7 grams of protein per 100 grams of weight, 14,000 IU vitamin A per 100 grams of weight, 187 mg/100gr calcium, 3.1 mg/100 gr. iron and 35 mg/100 gr. of vitamin C, proving that dandelion greens are a true nutritional powerhouse for anyone.

The common chicory (*Cichorium intybus*), or "chickory" as it is sometimes spelled, has pretty blue flowers that can be seen along railroad cuts and rural roadsides throughout America. In its distinguished past, farmer and President Thomas Jefferson

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proudly imported seeds from Italy to serve as a salad crop as well as fodder for his cattle. Anyone who has bought curly endive, the forced heads of radicchio and Belgian endive, or escarole for soups and salads has enjoyed the cultivated forms of this plant. New Orleans' famous chicory-laced coffee owes its smooth flavor to the roasted and ground roots of the chicory plant, making it one of the most widely used of the wild plant/herb group in America today. Because the wild form of chicory prefers areas in full sun and full pollution from vehicles, you may wish to deliberately grow this particular plant in your garden for safer gathering. Collect the flowering seed stalks when the first seeds are being dispersed by the wind and sow the seeds directly into the garden after the day length begins to shorten, around July 15 or mid-summer. There should be plenty of greens for you in late fall and early spring, and the roots can be dug carefully after a full summer of growth, planted close together in sand or potting mix, covered, and chilled in the refrigerator until you force them in early spring to create your own Belgian endives!

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Although different weeds grow in different parts of North America, there are several plants, such as dandelions, which are found throughout non-arid areas. Chickweed (*Stellaria media*) is a superb, edible weed that is eagerly eaten by all the birds I've worked with, from poultry and finches to cockatoos and macaws. A 17th century herbalist described chickweed as, "Little birds in cages (especially linnets) are refreshed with the lesser chickweed when they loathe their meat, whereupon it was called of some 'Passerina.'" Since another common name for it is "Hen's Inheritance," chickweed's use as fodder for poultry has been well known for centuries. It is a tiny, low-growing plant with weak, multi-branched stems, succulent small egg-shaped leaves, and small star-like white flowers that grows only during the colder parts of the year and requires good levels of soil moisture to thrive. Seeds are available for this plant, but if you transplant a young plant and allow it to flower and grow throughout one season, you should be well supplied with plants from self-sown seeds. The seeds will continue to germinate for several years, which is why many lawn experts spend so much time trying to

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wipe it out. This plant is used medicinally, in addition to being a delicate salad green with edible flowers, so again, avoid over-feeding unless you really like emerald green poop! Many health food stores carry chickweed in a dried form and finch breeders I have known use it in their seed mixes as a source of micronutrients. If you allow it to grow, it will spread to cover several feet. Chickweed does not root along its stems, which allows for neat harvest by rolling the whole plant up until you come to the tiny stem and then severing it there to avoid bringing unnecessary dirt into the aviary. You can expect to find this plant during the fall months and early spring although in cooler climates it may continue on throughout the summer in shady areas. Try harvesting the growing tips to add a fresh flavor to your salads. It has a very nice fragrance as well, which is noticeable only after you have picked it... unless your nose is 2 inches off the ground! When chickweed is abundant, consider drying some to use during the hottest and coldest months of the year as a supplement.

Another plant that is found during the slightly warmer months is the smooth leaved plantain (*Plantago major*), a small ground-hugging plant with large smooth, heavily veined leaves in a rosette and weird thin spikes of seeds. It is another favorite "nasty grass weed" and is found more commonly in the Mid-Atlantic regions than in the Deep South. Although the leaves at all stages are useful the younger leaves are preferred, while the seed stalks and roots are not edible. This is another plant whose cultivated form is considered a great Italian salad delicacy called "Erba stella".

In many areas of the South you will hear old-timers talking of the wonderful flavor of "poke salad" (*Phytolacca Americana*) or young pokeweed sprouts. While it is true that they can be delicious when properly prepared, it is also true that the vast majority of the plant is poisonous and unless you are experienced with it, do not be tempted to use it for yourselves or your birds. There are plenty of other good things around such as the very earliest cresses, peppergrasses, and other members of the mustard family. These tiny plants are some of the earliest greens to grow in spring and will only get as large as the circumference of a teacup



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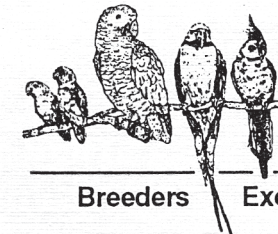
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at best. They have a delicious sharp peppery flavor and are a welcome addition to a bland lettuce salad in February and March. In Southern areas, a large version of this is sold as “creasy greens” or cress with both versions being the land equivalent of watercress. It is hard to find enough of this to feed a large flock so you may be better off sowing some early cress seeds, rape, or mustard greens for your birds instead.

Later on into May, June, and beyond, weed plants such as purslane and lamb’s quarters will sprout in many gardens. Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea sativa*) is a very old European salad green that has thick, succulent leaves and is another ground-hugger with a slight citrus flavor. Seeds are available for this green in gold and red forms as well as the common green. Lamb’s Quarters, (*Chenopodium album*) are related to spinach but have silvery, almost powdery looking leaves and can grow very tall (more than 3 feet).

Lamb’s quarters are useful for organic gardeners because they attract undesirable insects, allowing the desirable crops to grow without bug problems. They are eaten cooked, but the youngest sprouts can be fed to birds as a raw treat. Other common names for this plant include “pigweed” and “fat hen” which shows how important it was regarded as a livestock food source. One of the cultivated forms is called “Spren” and is available in a purple-tinted form, making it very attractive for use in the back of a flower border. Various amaranths, which are often confused with

lamb’s quarters, can also be grown as summer greens. There are a variety of seed-producing varieties available as well to add interest to your seed mixes. Seeds are available from many sources.

Although not a weed, a rather unusual spinach substitute for summer can be grown in hanging baskets and as a vine in large pot, producing large amounts of greens before frost. Malabar spinach (*Basella alba*) is a vine from India that is widely used throughout the Epcot Center as a space-saving food/ornamental crop. Seed is available for both a red-stemmed ornamental and the large leaved green form. It can be eaten either raw or cooked by both people and birds. It grows slowly at first but when the hot weather arrives, it can produce additional shoots from every leaf node and cover large areas of trellising or fencing very quickly. Fortunately it is killed by frost and the seeds cannot survive our cold winters or it would be another kudzu here in the South. Of course, kudzu was also brought here as an edible plant and it is widely used as such in the country of origin, Japan. Malabar spinach can be grown successfully indoors in good light conditions

The common violet (*Viola odorata*) seen during the spring months is also edible. Both the leaves and the flowers contain huge amounts of vitamins C and A, so much so that care needs to be taken not to feed but a little bit of the leaves. The leaves and flowers can be used sparingly in salads, with the flowers having a sweet taste. An edible flowered cousin, the small-flowered



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pansy, can also be fed in small quantities and used as a garnish. For those feeding vegetarian or semi-vegetarian reptiles, the early leaves and particularly the flowers are eaten with enthusiasm and provide a welcome change in the diet.

Sheep Sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*) leaves are also excellent sources of vitamins C and A, and have a pleasant lemony, acid flavor. They are considered an indicator plant for poor, acid soils and are often found in open fields growing in full sun. The plant is small with thin, arrow-shaped leaves in a rosette and foot-tall

spires of tiny flowers, which are a beautiful red color from a distance in early spring. They can be used both in soups and salads in early spring before they flower. The leaves make a tempting nibble for gardeners weeding their beds!

As you can see, there is a huge selection of edible plants available to the savvy aviculturist, and far more exist than I have listed here. There are many cultivated plants in our flower gardens and perennial beds that can also be used to vary the diet of both bird and human, and cultivated forms of most of the wild greens can add variety to any garden. Research the internet and your local Cooperative Extension Service to get even more ideas. After all, a weed is just a "plant out of place!"

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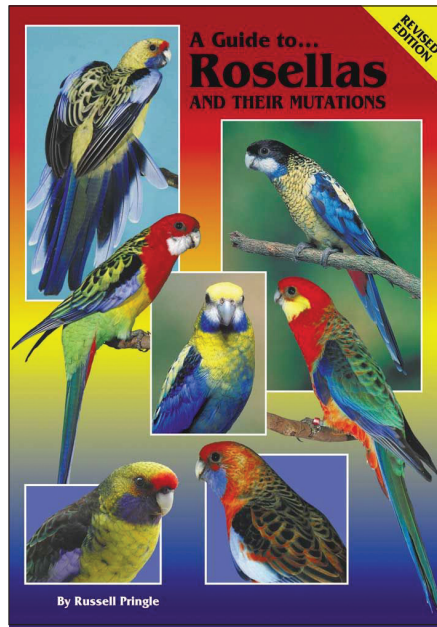
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