

Native Wild Foods

Remember, in all of your foraging, to avoid collecting wild foods near roadways where heavy metals and other pollutants from automobile exhaust settles on plants, or any place where insecticides or herbicides are used, or stagnant water.

Three of the beautiful and common water lilies that grow in Florida's quiet waters—streams, ponds, and lakes—can be included in your pantry of edible wild plants.

Water lilies are in the family Nymphaeaceae, named for the water nymphs of Greek mythology. The three edible water lilies are the America lotus, *Nelumbo lutea*, the fragrant water lily, *Nymphaea odorata*, and the yellow pond lily, *Nuphar lutea*.

The American lotus is also called the yellow lotus, lotus lily, nelumbo, and water chinquapin. It grows in quiet waters at depths of three to six feet. It has pale yellow, waxy flowers, six to eight inches in diameter, that bloom above the water on long stems from July to late fall. The leaves are huge—bowl-shaped and a foot in diameter, also carried above water. The petiole of the leaf stem is attached to the center of the leaf.

The unopened young blossoms and still-curved leaves are good to eat. They can be boiled and buttered, or added to soups and stews.

The seed pod looks like a shower head, and is frequently included in winter bouquets, sometimes painted or gilded. The pods ripen in summer to autumn. The unripe seeds can be boiled or roasted. The ripe seeds, however, are very hard, and must be roasted and cracked. They can then be eaten like a chestnut, and they taste a bit like them, too. The roasted seeds also can be ground into flour and added to other flours for breads, muffins, and cookies. (I may try them in the acorn candy recipe sometime.)

The root is good to eat, too, though it's a little harder to gather since it's in three to six feet of water! Harvest the crisp tubers from fall to spring, and boil or roast them and eat them like sweet potatoes.

WATER LILIES

by Dick Deuerling and Peggy Lantz



Yellow Pond Lily

Art from *Wekiva River, Scenic and Wild* by Diane Pierce

The yellow pond lily is also called spatterdock, cow lily, yellow water lily, and water collard. The habitat is the same as the other lilies, plus it can be found growing in swamps.

It blooms from May to late fall. The flowers have fleshy petals and look like yellow golf balls. Nothing else in the water looks like it.

The leaves are oval, fleshy, notched at the base, and large—9 to 15 inches across. Unlike the others, these leaves don't lie down, but stand up out of the water.

The foot or so of the terminal end of the fleshy rhizome is the edible part. Quarter-inch round roots anchor it to the bottom, and the whole system could be as big as my leg. Gather the rhizomes from fall to spring when they're full and crispy. They get mushy and soft in the summer, when blooming is taking its stored nourishment, but in fall when the blooming and seeding is over, the plant begins to replenish its starch. The rhizome fills out and becomes crispy. Scrub the gathered roots and cut them up. Add them to soups and stews, or boil or roast them for 25 to 30 minutes. They can also be dried and ground into flour.

The seeds are probably the best part. The seed pod is urn-shaped, and yellowish-green, tinged at the top with red. A row of spurs protrude from the bottom around the stem. Harvest the seed pods in the fall when they are ripe. Dry them, and open them up and remove the BB-like seeds. They pop like popcorn—perhaps not quite as well as Orville Redenbacher's, but they pop pretty well, and they are tasty.

The seed pods can also be parched over slow heat in a skillet. This releases the outside of the hull, which can then be winnowed to remove the hulls. Then they can be cooked like rice or ground into flour. These are very, very good.



Fragrant Water Lily

The fragrant water lily is also called the white water lily, and grows in the same quiet-water habitat. Its flowers bloom from June to late fall—white, with a yellow center and petals that taper at the tip. They smell too good to eat! But they are tasty, and there are plenty, plenty, plenty of them, so enjoy with no sense of guilt.

Gather the unopened flower buds, cook them for two or three minutes in boiling water, and serve with butter. Or saute them in butter. Or, as with other foods, wild or cultivated, they can be added to soups or stews.

The leaves, five inches across, lie flat on top of the water, like a dinner plate with a wedge cut out where the stem is attached. They are dull green on top, purplish underneath, and are edible when they are still underwater and just beginning to uncurl. Cook them in salted water eight to ten minutes.

The seed pods mature underwater, and though I understand they're edible, too, I have never tried them.