

NATURALLY: Be sure to eat the invaders, garlic mustard

- By DR. DANA DRISCOLL Special to the Gazette
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Walking in White’s Woods along many paths, especially the road on the way up to the left from the 12th Street entrance, you can find copious amounts of garlic mustard (*alliarica petiolata*).

Garlic mustard is an herb native to Europe, but, unfortunately, it has spread here and now can cause ecological disruptions. Garlic mustard is classified by the Pennsylvania Department of Natural and Conservation Resources (DCNR) as an “invasive weed.”

The good news is that it is a very delicious and abundant wild edible, so as you see the supermarket prices soaring, this can be an excellent wild green that you can safely forage as much as you want, anywhere you want. The more you pull and eat, the more you help our ecosystem. Thus, in this article, I’ll share how to identify garlic mustard and some delicious things you can do with your harvest.

Like other species with the DCNR’s “invasive” label, garlic mustard doesn’t fit well in our local ecosystem. Animals, insects, or birds do not eat garlic mustard, nor does it provide any habitat or nectar. Even the deer do not eat this plant — leaving it to grow unchecked, unchallenged and spreading abundantly.

Garlic mustard also displaces native plants and out-competes with plants, especially in areas with disturbance (so you will often find a lot of it along trails). So, controlling garlic mustard requires humans to learn it, harvest it and eat it.

To successfully eat this delicious invader, it is first necessary to understand how garlic mustard grows and when to harvest — both for your table and to break the lifecycle of the plant. As a biannual plant in our region, the first year the garlic mustard usually grows low to the ground in a basal rosette (a circle of leaves) that comes out of a single root. Often, many of these can be found together carpeting the forest floor, growing up to 6 inches or 8 inches tall.

The young, first-year leaves are kidney-shaped. As it gets older, the leaves take on more of a scalloped-heart shape as they grow up the stem. The leaves do not have any hair. In the spring, the roots and new leaf growth smell of garlic when crushed.

In the second year after overwintering, the garlic mustard grows tall — up to 5 feet tall, but often closer to 2- to 3-feet tall in our forests here in full shade. By the summer solstice, these tall garlic mustard plants produce flowers and later, seeds.

The flowers are small, clustered, four-petal white flowers and the seed pods are long and skinny, green at first and then brown as the seeds dry and disperse. This plant may remind you of other mustards, lettuces or kales — and that is because it is in the Brassicaceae (mustard) family.

Once you are certain you have a positive ID, you can strategically harvest it. If we are seeking to control garlic mustard through harvesting, the goal is to harvest it before it goes into flower — and to harvest the whole plant, root and all.

The great news is that every part of the plant is edible and subject to your culinary creativity. After flowering, the plant gets tough and bitter and is not good to eat.

You can harvest any new-growth green leaves (with the root) in spring or summer. Greens are best in the spring and are most tender for first-year growth — at this stage, you can use them fresh in salads, stir-fries, soups and more.

Second-year leaves are less tender than first-year leaves, but still great in soups or in any other dish that you cook (but not as good raw).

Here are a few recipes I enjoy making with garlic mustard:

Garlic Mustard Pesto

2 cups garlic mustard leaves (fresh, chopped)

¼ cup walnuts, pistachios, or pine nuts

2 cloves garlic

½ cup olive oil

½ cup of parmesan cheese (shredded)

In your food processor, add garlic, nuts, and garlic. Process until the mixture is finely minced. Add olive oil and blend until smooth. Add cheese at the end. Use on bread, vegetables, sandwiches, meats, fish, pasta, or as a dip.

Garlic Mustard Root Spread

This garlic mustard root spread tastes like horseradish and it can be added to Greek yogurt or sour cream to make a fantastic dip, tossed with vegetables, or even mixed with butter for bread. Take 2 cups of washed, chopped garlic mustard roots (first-year roots, not stringy or tough) and after thoroughly washing, pulse the roots in your food processor. If you want a milder flavor, add 4 tablespoons of apple cider vinegar immediately after pulsing. If you prefer a stronger flavor, wait five minutes and then add the vinegar. Finish with 1 tsp of salt to taste.

I hope to see you out in White's Woods and other local parks in the spring hunting for and eating this delicious invader.

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The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.