

# Wild, Edible Palestine

Courtesy of Mashjar Juthour

We have some wonderful wild herbs in Palestine. On the mountain where Mashjar Juthour is located, three species of herbs grow: thyme, sage, and water mint. We pick these for tea but are always careful to take only the top few leaves, and we never pick when the plants are flowering. The entire life goal of a plant is to flower and reproduce, so we always want to ensure its continued existence on the mountain.

Delicious, nourishing fruits grow on our wild, indigenous trees. We eat from the Palestinian Buckthorn, Spiny Hawthorn, and Eastern Strawberry trees when in season, and we snack on carob throughout the year. People find it strange when they see this dark brown, hard stick in our mouths. A few months ago, our one-year-old son was eating carob, and a kid asked what it was. When I answered that it was carob, the child was even more puzzled.

Mashjar Juthour.



Think about organic herbs, and the first thing that might come to mind is a pot over a fire. In that pot, place some spring-fresh water, some tea leaves, and a sprig of freshly picked wild sage.



Did you know that our foremothers used to dry the acorns of oak trees and grind them into a powder from which they made bread or brewed a hot drink? Our ancestors would feed their families from Palestine's biodiversity! We have wild asparagus, lettuce, mushrooms (be careful some are very dangerous!), common mallow, fennel, leek, sting nettle, and, my personal favorite, capers. Ironically, in a culture where we pickle everything, the caper bud and caper berry aren't part of our traditional ferments, but they are delicious and grow wild everywhere.

I'm not naming these so that you go out and eat. On the contrary, we have ravaged our flora. Although stunning wild Anatolia orchids once filled our hills, today they are a rare sight because we have dug up so many of them to use in *sahlab*. People still forage the leaves of the beautiful Cyclamen to roll like *warak dawali* (grapevine leaves), robbing the plant of its ability to draw energy from the sun and thrive. Once my husband and I saw a man rip up wild thyme plants by the roots to take and sell.

When we do go out foraging, we should be very careful about what we take and how we take it. For example, if a Cyclamen plant has six leaves, we should only pick two and move on to the next plant. Or if we harvest from a Spiny Hawthorn tree, we should not only leave some fruits to seed in the

hope of more trees growing in the wild, we should also remember that our wild fauna sustain themselves on these fruits. Even when we harvest olives at Mashjar Juthour, we always leave many on the tree for the birds. This is responsible foraging, recognizing that we should be the protectors of nature, and if we take from it, we must always do so in a way that is not harmful.



Buckthorn fruits are small but mighty in their health benefits - and utterly delicious.



Wild thyme with bee.



This wild chicory is edible.



Spiny hawthorn. The leaves, bark, flowers, berries and roots of this amazing tree are beneficial.



Cyclamen, unfortunately, is frequently harvested irresponsibly.



A beautiful botanical illustration of the Anatolia orchid by Lois Nakleh. You can see the root that was over-harvested, to the great detriment of this species, in order to make traditional sahlab, which thankfully no longer includes the flower as an ingredient.

Our mountains and valleys are full of wild, edible herbs, vegetables, and fruits. But as we become increasingly disconnected from nature, we no longer even know what to look for or to pick - nor, unfortunately, how to pick in a way that ensures the health of the plant.

The flora in Palestine and our knowledge of the names and of the ways in which our ancestors used them are all part of our natural heritage. We must learn and transfer this traditional knowledge because it is OUR traditional knowledge. And considering how much of our culture has been appropriated by our occupiers, we must resist the colonization of our minds. Get out in nature, learn about and protect your heritage.

*Mashjar Juthour* is an arboretum in Palestine, a living museum of native and endangered trees, where all wildlife is protected. *Mashjar Juthour* works through family activities and offers training sessions to promote environmental education and change. It is located on the last undeveloped mountain in Ramallah, just before Ein Kinya. Visitors are always welcome and advised to contact *Mashjar Juthour* directly to arrange visits.



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