

# NATIVE WILD FOODS:

by Dick Deuerling, as told to Peggy Lantz

## Radishes ●●●●●●●●●● and Onions

Florida betony (*Stachys floridana*), sometimes called hedge nettle (though it doesn't seem nettle-y at all) is a member of the mint family — you can tell by its square stem. It has a pinkish-purple flower with dots in the throat.

The edible part is a crispy white crinkly-shaped underground tuber. Even Mary Francis Baker said it is edible. They're like radishes without the hot taste, and can be eaten raw, out-of-hand or in a salad, or boiled for a short time in a little water. It's possible that



they'd make a good pickle, but I haven't tried it yet. I plan to, though, and will let you know if they turn out tasty.

About the end of February, the new year's underground tubers start to form. Tubers from the previous year will become soft and mushy as they are used to feed the plant. They are at their best about now, during March and April, and are good through at least May.

The tubers are within a couple of inches of the soil surface, and can sometimes be pulled up with the tubers attached. Digging a little with your hand or trowel will assure a good collection of tubers.

One day, I was presenting a program for a garden club on edible wild plants. The group was standing in an orange grove, nibbling samples of my collection of wild edibles, when one listener complained that they'd never find the species I was talking about. I looked around, leaned over, and pulled up half a dozen tubers of Florida betony, some of which I'd brought, already cleaned, for them to eat.

Let me warn you that Florida betony will take over your yard if they get started. (Peggy Lantz says: I will verify that statement, for my yard is full of it, and getting fuller.)

Every plant that smells like onion or garlic is good to eat. If it looks like onion or garlic, but has not the smell, beware.

The most common species is *Allium canadense*, which has flattened, solid leaves, not hollow tubes, as onions do. The pinkish-white bloom comes out of a three-part spathe. Also out of the spathe comes bulblets, sometimes with little tails on them.

All parts of the wild onion are edible. You can eat the underground bulbs, or the little bulblets up on top, or the long thin leaves.

Now is the season — before flowering — to use them as you would green onions. If you want to use the best bulbs later in the summer or fall — they'll be like little pearl onions — you have to know where the plants are before the tops die back; in late summer the whole plant becomes dormant, and there will be nothing left on top to show you where to dig! These are the bulbs I use for pickling. They are about six inches deep, so you need to do a lot of finding, digging, and cleaning, but it's worth it.

I don't buy anything from the store except the vinegar. I use two red bay *Persea borbonia* leaves in each jar. I use the seeds of peppergrass and wild mustard. And I never can make enough to last the year!

Garlic butter can be made with wild garlics or onions. Pick the green leaves before the plant blooms and sends up bulblets. Use five stalks of onion and



Photos by Peggy Lantz

Peppergrass

two sticks of butter or margarine. Wash the onions well to remove sand. Cut off and throw away the roots. Cut off any yellow or dried up parts. Chop the rest into one-inch lengths. Soften the butter until it's mushy, put it all in the blender, and blend until you can't see any pieces of garlic or onion any more. The butter will take on a beautiful chartreuse color, with a taste that's out of this world. Store it in a plastic container to chill, and use it in dip or on French bread.

Onions propagate by splitting at the bottom, or the bulblets on top fall to the ground and start new plants. You can propagate onions in your own yard by scattering the bulblets off the bloom, or by transplanting the underground bulbs.

### Pickled onions

- 1½ quarts of bulbs
- ½ cup salt
- 1½ cups of granulated sugar
- 1½ tbsps. of mustard seed, either wild or from the store
- 1½ tbsps. of peppergrass seed
- 2 bay leaves per ½ pint jar
- 4½ cups of distilled vinegar

Scald onions in boiling water for 2 minutes, then quickly dip in cold water. If any skins are loose, peel them off.

Put onions in a glass, stainless steel, or enamel pan. Sprinkle with salt. Cover with cold water, and let stand for 12 hours. Then drain, rinse, and drain again.

Combine sugar, mustard seed, peppergrass seed and vinegar, and simmer for 5 or 6 minutes.

Sterilize jars. Pack onions in the clean hot jars. Add 2 bay leaves to each jar along side the onions. Pour hot liquid over top to within a half inch of top, covering all onions. Cap immediately, using new lids. Process for 5 minutes in boiling water bath. Makes 6 or 7 half-pints.