

Stitchwort

Food is the last frontier. I conclude this because it is perhaps the first frontier that the authorities have declared closed.

When Jared Diamond, in his Pulitzer-Prize winning book *Guns, Germs, and Steel* stated that people had already “explored virtually all useful wild plants and domesticated all the ones worth domesticating,” nobody flinched. He was simply expressing the accepted opinion in crop science that there are no significant food plants left for humans to discover—or develop significant relationships with.

Foragers are less likely to fall into that complacency, for every time we do, something like lesser stitchwort is likely to happen. It happened to me only a year ago.

I first identified this plant about ten years ago when I was botanizing for fun, toting field guides in a canvas shopping bag down a sand road through a wooded area. I saw this little flower growing atop a dainty stem that threaded its way almost knee-high by leaning on grasses near a ditch. The tough, raspy stem had tiny, thin, pointed leaves arranged in pairs every few inches along its length. I pulled out my *Newcomb's Wildflower Guide*, followed the keys, and came up with *Stellaria graminea*. I checked a few other guides to confirm this, noting the typical array of contrived common names that almost nobody actually uses (common stitchwort, grass-leaved stitchwort).

“*Stellaria*. A chickweed, eh?” I thought to myself. “Too bad it’s so tough and tiny, we could use some chickweed around here.” In my neck of the woods, you see, the common chickweed is exceedingly uncommon.

Many years later I was in my garden in early spring, digging up parsnips that had overwintered, when I spotted a vaguely familiar but mysterious plant. This weed had formed the densest, thickest mat of little prostrate stems I had ever seen, creeping over a couple square feet of wet soil. I kept using it to wipe the mud from my hands as I alternated between digging parsnips and moving my 10-month-old daughter to less muddy locations. When I’d finished digging the roots, I washed up and went back to examine that muddy mat of green, only to discover several more carpets of this weed.

My gut feeling told me, “That’s a food plant.” It looked like a kind of chickweed, but I knew it wasn’t. It was obviously perennial, and chickweed is annual. I knew chickweeds: mouse-ear chickweed, starry chickweed, common chickweed, giant chickweed. This wasn’t one of them. Another kind of chickweed? I brought the plant home and was relieved to see that I had the volume of *Flora of North America* covering chickweed. I was much less relieved to notice that between the three chickweed genera *Stellaria*, *Cerastium*, and *Myosoton*, the book covered 57 species. I never would have guessed. Without the flowers, it was hopeless. Nevertheless, I spent a few hours looking through every source I could to see what other kinds of chickweed might be common in my area, but all I could come up with were these stupid stitchworts. I knew what stitchworts were—not this plant, and not food.

I tried to determine for certain, without the flower, that this was indeed *some* species of chickweed. I couldn’t—but I was certain that it was nothing too dangerous to taste. I took a little bite. Aha! It *was* chickweed—that corn-silk flavor is unmistakable. Only this was the best, sweetest, crispest chickweed that had ever touched my tongue. But I reluctantly spit it out and waited until I could identify it to partake.

My mystery plant was everywhere; my backyard, garden, driveway, beside the lake where I went fishing. I had a plan. I found a few specimens in sunny spots along south slopes and heat-reflecting objects, which I knew would flower first. If I could identify the vanguard flowers, I could then head to north slopes and find a few delayed, tender plants to eat.

I watched the stems grow day by day. After a week, the dense mats shot out long arms that angled up into the air. It took these only a few days to grow into what seemed like a totally different organism. I recognized it before the flowers even opened: lesser stitchwort. I was so eager to confirm this that I pried open a still-closed flower bud and dissected it with a hand lens, then ran to the north side of my rock pile to get my first mouthful of the new discovery. And that's how the last chickweed I'd ever eat became my favorite.

Nature never ceases to dazzle me with its complexity. Not only are there 57 chickweeds in North America, but each has its own characteristic flavor, texture, and life history. This one is a perennial of moist fields that changes its form drastically as it flowers; the early spring form, being both short and ephemeral, has hardly been noticed. I did find vague mention of this transformation in one botanical manual, which noted that overwintering shoots have much broader leaf blades—but this only hints at the utterly different appearance of the plant in early spring, and the metamorphosis it undergoes as it matures.

I wondered how many other secrets the chickweeds hold? There are arctic species, mountain species, bog species—and who has tried them? One species grows swollen buds that are detached and washed away by floods and root elsewhere to propagate the plant. Another has thick, fleshy leaves and only grows in salt marshes of the far north—could this be an unheralded gourmet vegetable of the highest order?

Today I brought my daughter, now 22 months old, with me to pick some stinging nettles in a pasture north of our house, near the site of an old caved-in log farmhouse near a spring at the edge of the woods. I knelt down near the four-inch nettle shoots, and noticed that my knees were being cushioned by sprawling mats of stitchwort. I picked a growing tip and held it out; she unhesitatingly popped it into her mouth and chewed. “Stitchwort,” I told her. Three seconds later she begged, “More titchwor. More titchwor.” I handed her several. After eating a few of my own I said, “You pick” She inspected the ground, plucked a few stems, and held them up proudly, “Sitchwoot!”

“Thank God for little sprouts,” was all I could think.

Sometimes I catch myself thinking I need to go on vacation to Virginia or Idaho just to discover some new wild edibles, but this one was literally in my backyard. It humbled me. As we grazed I thought of an old man I met once who proudly proclaimed, “I already know all the edible plants; I been foraging for fifty years.” I hope I never become that confident. But I know that if I do, stitchwort is going to happen again.