Food for Free

In the seventeenth of a series of articles on Raasay’s flora, botanist STEPHEN BUNGARD takes a look at edible plants.

In terms of free food in bulk, Raasay plants are limited to things like brambles, hazel nuts, blueberries and raspberries plus some wild strawberries. However if you want to be more adventurous – and help control an invasive non-native plant - there are many ways of preparing young shoots of Japanese Knotweed, which has a taste said to be reminiscent of lemony rhubarb.

Elder trees are usually near houses and the flowers can be used for elderflower champagne and cordial and various flavouring uses, etc. Make sure they are cooked as they are mildly toxic when raw. The berries can be used to make a fruit wine, but the blackbirds are very quick to take them. There is a hedge of Blackthorn which flowers well but rarely produces much in the way of sloes.

Cowberry (the Lingonberry of Scandinavia) is tasty but rarely fruits here and should not be taken in any quantity. Rose hips can be used in tea, jam and soup. They are initially high in Vitamin C but this is rapidly destroyed during drying or processing.

The underground tubers of Pignut can be eaten raw but remember that you need the landowner’s permission to uproot a wild plant – and be sure of your identification as this plant family contains poisonous species (Hemlock, Hemlock Water-dropwort...) as well as many food staples (Carrot, Parsley, Parsnip...). The roots of Silverweed are starchy and before the introduction of potatoes were grown as a crop (on Raasay?) and dried to make a bread flour. Young Stinging Nettles can be used as greens or to make soup, beer or tea.

Watercress grows in the Fearns area but should not be eaten raw as it can host liver fluke when growing in grazing areas. Water Mint grows in marshy areas and can be used, though it is a bit coarse compared with garden varieties. There are garden escapes of Spear Mint or its hybrids in at least three places. I mentioned Sea Arrowgrass as a substitute for Chives in my article last December.

I have probably forgotten to include something obvious and no doubt readers will know of other uses of native plants as flavourings, etc. All this is before one considers fungi and seaweeds - beyond my competence.