



Some seasons produce incredible bounties of wild mushrooms in Eagle County, as evidenced by this mid-summer haul by Kasia Karska and her foraging friends.



Wild Feasts

HIKING WITH PURPOSE AND OTHER FACETS OF FORAGING

By Katie Coakley

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRENT BINGHAM

Foraging — the act of gathering wild food for free — has become a buzzy sort of pastime in the past few years. From mycophiles sharing pictures of their most recent fungi finds (sans location, of course) to naturopaths gathering rosehips, foraging seems like the cool new natural treasure hunt — complete with a treat at the end.



However, the act of utilizing nature's bounty for nourishment is nothing new. For centuries, foraging was a way of life for our ancestors — it was a necessity. During World War II, collecting food from the forest supplemented meager rations; in Europe and the United Kingdom, collecting wild rosehips to make syrup became an important way to provide vitamin C when imported fruit, like oranges, was widely restricted.

Now, grocery stores provide produce from around the world; foraging is no longer a necessity. However, it's transcended into something different — an opportunity.

Connection to the past

"Mushroom hunting, foraging, is my favorite sport in the summer. It makes hiking much more attractive," says Kasia Karska. "Hiking with purpose, we can call it."

Karska, who is the owner, lead designer and general contractor at Kasia Karska Design, grew up in Warsaw, Poland. Her parents would rent a cabin in the woods for the summer for the family to enjoy. Playing and wandering around, Karska learned mushroom foraging early in life from her nanny, aunts and other kids.

"When I came to the United States, I discovered the mushrooms are the same," she explains. "It's the same trees, and mushrooms are connected to the tree, pretty much the same type."





“If you have children, foraging is a great way to get them outside and curious. It’s a great way to teach them something that can be passed on.”

Mushrooms are deeply connected to both the trees and the loamy earth in forests. Locally both king bolete and aspen bolete are prevalent.



Elderflower in bloom.



Elderflower about to bloom. Wild mint, raspberries and serviceberries in bowl.

This connection to the past, to other places, is a common theme when it comes to foraging: “My mushroom-foraging buddy, Dahlia, she actually grew up in a refugee camp in Germany after World War II and mushrooms were...” Karska pauses, searching for the right words. “When I invited her to go for the first time here, you know, fast forward 50 years, she was in tears because it brought back her childhood.”

For Wolfgang “Wolf” Uberbacher, who owns Mountain Wolf Jeep Adventures and leads tours around the valley, foraging wasn’t trendy: It was a necessity.

Wolf grew up in Austria in a stone house built by his family, without electricity or running water. His family lived off the land; that’s how he started foraging.

“It was basically after a war (World War II); there was no food around,” he says. “We were literally forced to find food outside, in the mountains, in the forest, wherever we could find it. And when I was a little kid, that’s how I started.”

Not every forager starts in Europe, but many start young. Walk in the woods around the valley and you might see parents with kids peering down at the base of trees, searching for chanterelles; see that mess of dead-looking branches at the fence line that resembles tumbleweed? If there’s someone crouched down there, they might be digging up wild asparagus.

Anne Champigny, who grew up in Vermont, started foraging with her grandmother.

“It’s kind of a family thing for me,” Champigny explains. “I just enjoy the tradition of it. There’s nothing more satisfying than wandering around the forest and gathering your own food.”

Champigny recently returned to Vermont to forage for fiddlehead ferns, keeping the tradition alive. But another thread connects her to boletes, commonly known as porcinis.

“My other family heritage is Lithuanian and the boletus mushroom is a very traditional part of their culture,” Champigny says. “In the summer, one of my favorite things is to forage for the boletes and save them for winter for making soups. And before my great-aunt passed, I would send them back to her to keep that tradition alive for her because it was a big part of her Lithuanian culture.”

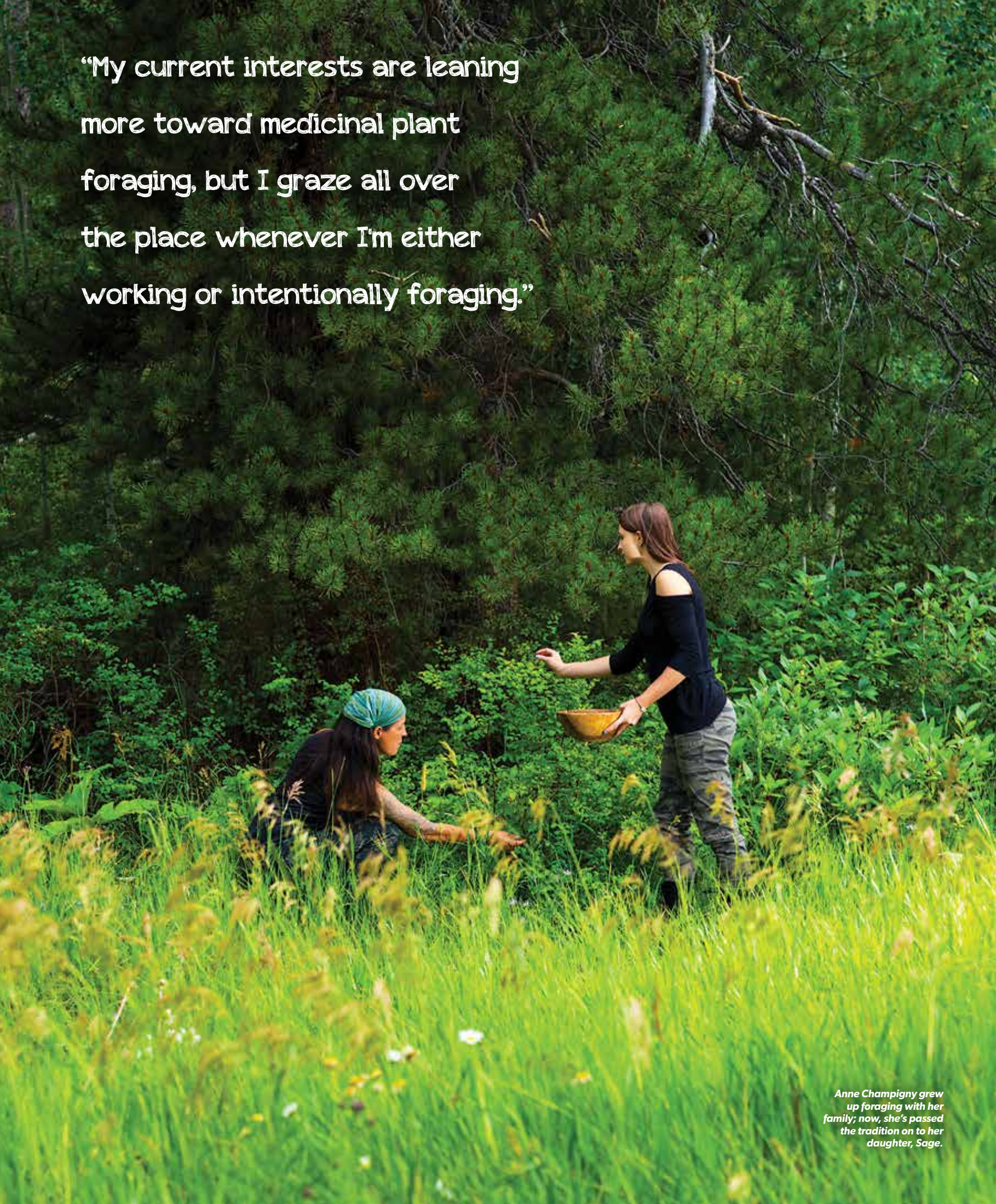
And she has passed on the tradition to her daughter, Sage. The two forage together.

Marvelous mushrooms

Many novice foragers are brought into the fold with the promise of mushrooms.

When it comes to finding fungi, our backyard ranks with the Alps and the Himalayas as prime mushroom habitat. Because mushrooms thrive at high elevations in cool, dense forests, the trails and trees around the Vail Valley are a prized hunting ground for mycophiles. Foragers can find oyster mushrooms almost year-round; porcinis and chanterelles, which grow during the

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Anne Champigny grew up foraging with her family; now, she's passed the tradition on to her daughter, Sage.



Serviceberries are abundant in Eagle County.

Wild raspberries and serviceberries are edible for humans, but white snowberries are very poisonous.



Wild fennel blooms in the summer.



summer months, from mid-July to the end of September and morels, which are more elusive, pop up in the spring.

“We have an abundance of mushrooms here,” Karska says. “My favorite, saffron milk caps, only grow above 10,000 feet.”

Karska has been foraging in the area for almost 20 years. Though saffron milk caps, *lactarius deliciosus*, cannot be dried or frozen, she says they’re delicious when eaten fresh. Other favorites? The boletes — king boletes, aspen boletes — also known as porcinis. When mushroom season starts, around mid-July, Karska’s out once or twice a week.

“Mushroom foraging can bring so much more than just looking for mushrooms,” Karska says. “You can make wonderful hiking excursions with your friends and include picnics. Sometimes we go out with friends and we make mushroom dishes and we set up in the forest and just have lunch and brunch. It’s just wonderful being in nature.”

More than morels

Though mushrooms seem to get the most press when it comes to foraging, there are plenty of other edible items in the forest — including some that can help heal.

“I mostly wild-harvest herbs local to the area, and make healing salves and tinctures,” explains Jocelyn Laferriere, a healer-yogi-cacao practitioner and green witch who owns



Juniper berries can be used for syrups as well as a stand-alone spice.

The Belden Witch. “We’re super lucky up here. I harvest everything from wild mullein to pine resin and pine needles themselves. There are so many medicinal properties in everything.”

Laferriere creates a variety of products including tinctures, salves and wild-harvested smudges — products for home and healing that she describes as “spiritual self-care items” — that she sells at farmers’ markets.

From placing pine needles in a pot to simmer for bronchial health (breathing in the steam can help open nasal passages) to using garlic and mullein-infused oil for earaches, Laferriere says there’s a certain kind of magic in harvesting your own plant medicine.

Champigny also extolls the virtues of non-mycelium options. “My current interests are leaning more toward medicinal

plant foraging,” Champigny says, “but I graze all over the place whenever I’m either working or intentionally foraging.”

Champigny, who owns Worker Bee Co., a landscape business in Minturn, admits that she often “snacks” on the job, nibbling on plants that others might dismiss — she even plants some things deliberately to have options year-round. Purslane, currants, dandelion greens: All are delicious and nutritious...and plentiful.

In Colorado, elderflowers bloom early, but foragers have to wait until the heart of the summer to find goose-

berries, raspberries, thimbleberries and alpine currants.

‘Weed’ is just an opinion

The next time you’re strolling through the open space around the county, take some time to really look at the plants around you. Do you see thistles? Green grasses waving in the breeze? Queen Anne’s Lace spreading in the sun? Yes, those are weeds — but they’re also edible — and tasty.

“In your community around open spaces or along rivers or forest, there are so many, what people call ‘weeds,’ which are really, really nutritious,” Wolf says enthusiastically. “And a lot of people don’t even know that.”

Take a common plant like the dandelion. Drawn by the promise of wishes, most of our interactions come from assisting the proliferation of the fluffy white seeds. However, the entire plant is edible and will liven up any salad. Other greens found here include lamb’s quarter (not to be confused with lamb’s ear), wild spinach and wild lettuce. You might even find wheatgrass, a popular ingredient in smoothies.

“Why buy the expensive stuff when you can cut it yourself and bring it home?” Wolf asks. “A lot of quote ‘weeds’ are the most nutritious wild vegetables.”

Foraging can even help the local environment. According to the Colorado Department of Agriculture, “noxious weeds are non-native aggressive invaders that replace native vegetation, reduce agricultural productivity, cause wind and water erosion and pose an increased threat to communities from wildfire.” To mitigate the effects, the department’s Noxious Weed Program prevents the introduction of new invasive species; eradicates species with isolated or limited populations and contains and manages those invasive species that are well-established and widespread.

For a time, you might have seen goats out at Lake Dillon in Summit County, chomping on noxious weeds in spring and summer. Wolf has another option: Be the goat.

“Thistles are edible,” he says. “You can eat all of the thistle: the roots, sometimes when they first come out, the stems, and all that. So anyway, you would be doing the environment a favor also because this ‘noxious’ plant, they take over but you could use them.”

Wolf hasn’t eschewed the supermarket altogether, but he does take advantage of

the natural produce that he finds on his rambles.

"If you can go out and find lettuce or asparagus or some nettles and then bring it home and cook it, you get the best of everything," Wolf says. "I mean, I'm spoiled when it comes to that."

Teaching the next generation

Not everyone comes into foraging as a child; many adults have taken up the cheesecloth sack because of friends, word-of-mouth, or by enjoying the fruits of someone else's labor. But embarking on nature's treasure hunt is a great way to interact with the younger set.

"If you have children, foraging is a great way to get them outside and curious," Champigny says. "It's a great way to teach them something that can be passed on. Nature just has so much to offer."

In addition to adding an extra exploratory element to a hike, foraging is also rich in visual awareness for kids and adults. Foraging requires a closer look at plants that are plentiful but perhaps overlooked. Finding watercress, for example, is one element; knowing that it's edible — and tasty — is yet another.

It's also an opportunity to talk about sustainability and sharing.

"If you can start a kid young, they don't question the magic of the plant," Laferriere says. "If you say, 'We can't take all of this,' kids just say okay. They're not thinking of 'more, more, more; gimme, gimme, gimme.' And even if they do, and you explain to them why, they're just more easily accepting of the magic."

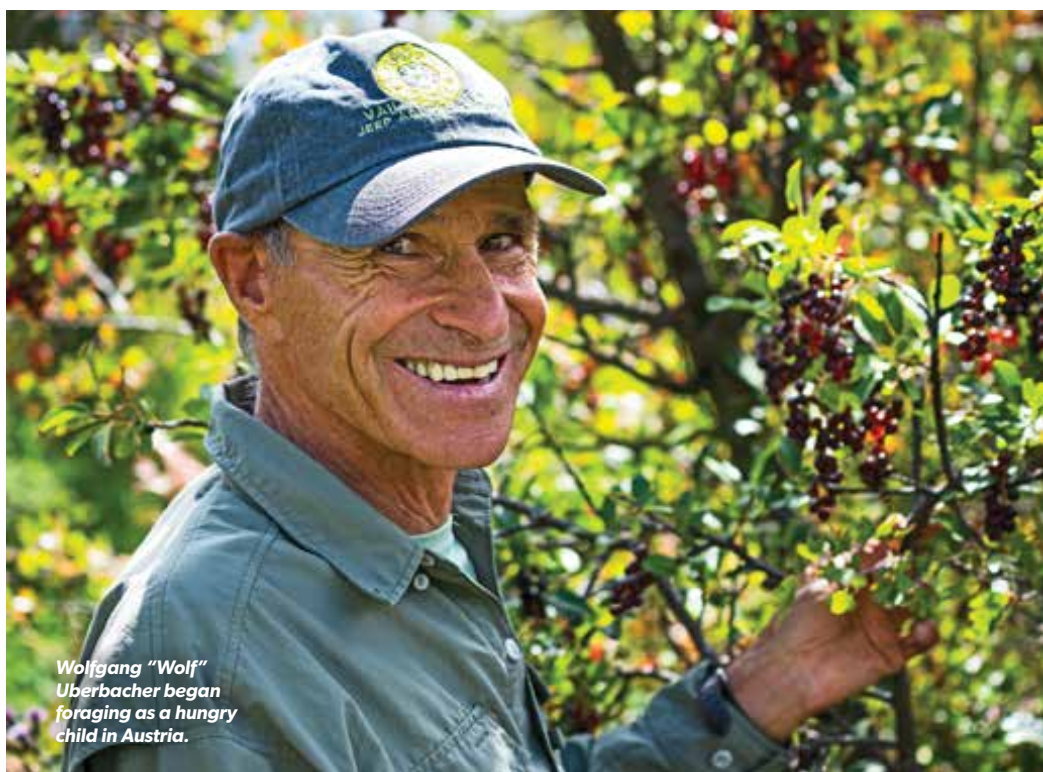
It's a lesson for all foragers: Tread lightly.

"When you think about foraging, number one is the environment," Wolf says. "If there's not enough, if it's only a few mushrooms here and there, I won't take them. Nature needs them more. It's the same with plants. If they're not ready yet, if they're too small, I will not take them. Or if I go to an area where I see tracks where the animals would've eaten it, I go to another place. Environment would come first."

But whether young or old(er), seasoned or green, foraging is a multifaceted experience that is accessible to all. Listen, see, touch, smell, think, taste — it envelops all the senses and tethers you to that particular place and time. And when you eat that watercress or berry or mushroom? You're transported back to that moment.

"It's a tradition," Karska says. "It's a wonderful way to celebrate the earth and the forest." **VVM**

"In your community around open spaces or along rivers or forest, there are so many, what people call 'weeds,' which are really, really nutritious."



Wolfgang "Wolf" Uberbacher began foraging as a hungry child in Austria.



Wild pepper, or *lepidium virginicum*, is also known as peppergrass.

King bolete is a tasty mushroom to cook with. Wolf likes to dry them for use all year.



FORAGING RESPONSIBLY

While foraging is exciting and provides a unique connection with nature, that connection requires the forager to develop a foraging ethic, says Hannah Rumble, community programs director at Walking Mountains Science Center. “Leave no trace” principles that many recreationists follow are inherently impossible when foraging, but there are general guidelines that can be handy when considering whether to take a handful or just a taste from that thimbleberry bush.

“The most important rule of thumb is to identify, with certainty, everything before you eat it,” Rumble says. “There are plenty of delicious-looking berries, leaves and mushrooms that would make you pretty sick. Never take more than you can use in the next couple of days and leave enough for the plant to recover (in the case of berries or leaves). This last one is the trickiest because if you’re only taking a little, and someone else comes along and only takes a little, and so on, it really depletes the area of important food sources for wildlife.”

This is primarily a concern along popular trails and roads, which are getting more crowded every summer.

And, at their core, “leave no trace” principles and foraging are in many ways like oil and water: They fundamentally don’t mix, says Scott Dunn, community programs coordinator at Walking Moun-

tains. There is an immediate impact left by foraging, but the key is to minimize that impact.

“Although the research is ongoing into the true ecological impacts of human foraging, it is not a stretch to see that, in a time when our public lands are seeing record-setting visitation, there would be an impact,” Dunn says. “It is a ‘death by a thousand cuts’ situation in which even if everyone takes only a handful of berries or mushrooms along a trail, there is a risk of a clear loss in that area. These items we forage to supplement our diets are often the direct and indirect food sources for a variety of other species that don’t have the luxury of pulling a snack out of their backpack.”

Mushroom foragers are required to register for a free permit at their nearest Forest Service ranger station. For Vail, that is the Holy Cross Ranger Station in Minturn. This helps the Forest Service understand usage and conservation needs.

“In developing your own foraging ethic, I recommend starting by becoming part of foraging communities online or going out with a trusted mentor,” Rumble advises.



Mushroom hunting is Kasia Karska's favorite summertime sport.