



GARDENING**Insights**

Don't spray it, sauté it!

Edible weeds in Tucson landscapes

Gardeners have difficulty relaxing during our winter and summer rainy seasons because the moisture incites a riot of greenery, much of it weedy. “Nuking” the landscape with poisons is what some people opt for, but there is a less hazardous and more environmentally friendly possibility—eating the weeds. Many of them are edible, especially when young and tender. Common species like pigweed, tumbleweed, purslane, and stork’s bill are all tasty additions to the dinner table.

The list below describes just a few of the edible weeds in Tucson. You’ll find them in yards and empty lots, in roadside ditches, and along washes in the area. Get a good field guide or take samples to experts for identification before eating them, however. There aren’t a lot of poisonous species, but it’s best not to take chances. Once you start eating the weeds, you’ll wish you had more at hand. You might even find yourself seeding them on purpose and encouraging your neighbors to let their places go trashy! Bon appetit!

EDIBLE TUCSON WEEDS

Amaranth (*Amaranthus* species) Also known as Pigweed, Quelite, Goosefoot

All the amaranths are edible, producing delicious greens that can be eaten green or cooked. These plants are very common summer weeds in Tucson and reproduce prolifically from small black edible seeds. They get 4 to 6 feet tall and one healthy plant can supply an entire meal’s worth of greens. Collect the tender ends of each branch. Sauté or steam them and eat like spinach.

Cheeseweed (*Malva parviflora*) Also known as Common mallow, Cheese mallow

Tucson alleys are full of this plant in winter and spring. It is a very vigorous mounding plant with dark green leaves and seed pods that resemble wheels of cheese. The small plants and shoots are edible green or cooked as are the seed pods. Like many of our weeds, it was introduced from Europe.

Lamb's quarters (*Chenopodium* species)

Lamb's quarters is a vigorous summer plant that can reach 6 feet tall in good conditions. The leaves and young shoots are edible raw or cooked and have a mild flavor like spinach. All *Chenopodium* species are edible.

London rocket (*Sisymbrium irio*)

Rocket is one of the most common winter weeds in Tucson. The leaves, stems, and seeds are all edible raw but have a hot flavor and are best used sparingly. Cooking the leaves moderates their heat somewhat.

Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*)

Purslane is a very nutritious, if somewhat mucilaginous, summer plant. It forms low mats of succulent leaves. All parts of the plant are edible and have a slightly tangy flavor. It can be eaten green in salads, cooked, or added to soups.

Shepherd's purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*)

This European import is common in winter and has edible leaves with a slightly peppery flavor. The fresh roots can be used as a substitute for ginger and the dried seeds for pepper.

Tumbleweed (*Salsola kali*)

Tumbleweed has rolled itself into weed status world over. Though known for the dried round skeletons that clog fence rows, it is little used for its edible foliage. Very young plants can be eaten raw and new shoots can be cooked and eaten as greens or used in soups or omelets.

Stork's bill (*Erodium* species)

Stork's bill is one of the few attractive weeds—it has ferny foliage and pale purple flowers. It appears in spring with the other desert wildflowers and can grow to 1 foot tall and wide with good rains. The leaves are edible raw or cooked and have a mild flavor.

RESOURCES

Kahanah Farnsworth's book "**A taste of nature**" covers edible plants of the Southwest and how to prepare them. It has plant descriptions, weed uses for food and medicine, plus several recipes for using weeds in place of traditional greens.

Native Seeds/SEARCH a local organization, sells seeds of some cultivated weeds like Amaranth. They also have books on foods from other local plants like Jojoba and Wolfberry. Their retail store is located at 526 N. 4th Avenue. Phone 622-5561.

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