



Hokkaido Nature Tours Sansai Wild Plants Guide



Japanese Name
Ezo Engosaku

English Name
Corydalis Ambigua

How to Identify
Grow in
“communities” in
damp forests of
deciduous broad-leaf
trees

Preparation
Boiling the flowers



Japanese Name
Udo

English Name
Aralia Cordata
Ambigua

How to Identify
Found along cliffs,
wet areas & rivers

Preparation
Boil, stir-fry or
tempura



Japanese Name
Yobusumasou

English Name
Parasenecio

How to Identify
Grow in moist forests,
leaves are triangular

Preparation
Boiling the stems



Japanese Name
Tsuru Ajisai

English Name
Vine Hydrangea

How to Identify
Grow as vines on
other trees with small
clusters of white
flowers

Preparation
Boiling the leaves or
tempura



Japanese Name
Gyojya Nin-niku

English Name
Alpine Leek

How to Identify
Grow well on steep
hillsides where dry
leaves don't cover the
small sprouts

Preparation
Tempura, stir fry or in
soups; can be dried &
preserved up to 1 year



Japanese Name
Nemagaritake

English Name
Bamboo Shoot

How to Identify
Found at high altitude
areas with heavy
snowfall during
winters

Preparation
Boiled, grilled or
tempura





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Japanese Name
Ezo no Ryukinka

English Name
Caltha Palustris

How to Identify
The flowers bloom next to waterways, wetlands & along streams; easily identified by bright yellow flowers

Preparation
Boiling the stems



Japanese Name
Yama Budou

English Name
Mountain Grape

How to Identify
This shrubby vine grows commonly in deciduous forests

Preparation
Tempura (leaves)



Japanese Name
Nirinsou

English Name
Anemone Flaccida

How to Identify
As its Japanese name suggests, this flower is identified by two flowers growing from a single base

Preparation
Boiling the flowers



Japanese Name
Harigiri

English Name
Kalopanax

How to Identify
There are thorns on the base, so the plant can be snapped from above the thorny parts

Preparation
Tempura (sprouts)



Japanese Name
Warabi

English Name
Bracken

How to Identify
Found along forest roads, forest rims & riverside grasslands

Preparation
Keep overnight in water boiled with baking soda to remove bitterness



Japanese Name
Fuki

English Name
Butterbur

How to Identify
Found along mountain swamps, slopes & riverbanks

Preparation
Rub stems with salt, place in boiled water for 3-5 minutes & cook to taste





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Sansai - or wild plant picking - is an ancient tradition that is still practiced today by across Japan. By the time spring finally arrives here in Hokkaido (mid-April onward), we cannot wait for the sansai picking season to start! There are said to be over 280 types of sansai in Japan. Among the most well-known varieties are *udo* (aralia sprouts), *kogomi* (fiddle heads), *fuki* (butterbur), *warabi* (bracken shoots), *nemagaritake* (young bamboo shoots), and *gyojya nin-niku* (alpine leek), to name a few. Typical sansai meals include *udo no Sumiso* (boiled *udo* seasoned with vinegar & miso), tempura of all types and miso soup with *fuki*.

Sansai literally means “mountain vegetables” and is a general term for the edible wild plants that grow in Japan’s forests and wetlands. Spring is the only true season for sansai as the young sprouts are still soft enough to be eaten. After the first few weeks of growth, most sansai become too tough and rubbery, so getting out early in the season is critical for success. Even early on, some sansai are quite bitter, so many of the wild plants must be boiled to remove the bitterness.

According to Japanese mythology, the practice of sansai has exists for at least 5,000 years, dating back to the Jomon Period when Japan was populated by indigenous groups. It’s logical to assume that sansai origins may indeed be much older as hunter-gatherer societies relied on wild food to survive. Judging from the famed Sannai-Maruyama archeological site in Aomori Prefecture - said to be the largest & oldest Jomon Period site in Japan - archeologists believe that the ancient Jomon people even knew how to remove the bitterness from some sansai, as well as to preserve sansai using salt-pickling techniques that allowed the wild plants to be eaten the following winter.

What is certain is that since the advent of sansai picking many thousands of years ago on the archipelago, subsequent generations have preserved the knowledge in continuity until today. Frequently throughout Japan’s tumultuous history, the practice of sansai meant the difference between life and death, particularly between the 12th - 19th Centuries when famine, war and natural disasters were common across Japan due to (relatively) large populations but poor technological capabilities that limited the efficiency of agriculture, fishing and animal husbandry.

If you are heading out for sansai hunting, here are some guidelines to keep you safe and in harmony with nature:

1. Hire a Local Guide

Sansai grow deep inside forests and normally there are no trails that lead to the best patches. Even if you luckily find a good sansai patch, it can be difficult to identify which sansai to pick and which to avoid as many edible sansai have non-edible “cousins”. While your eyes are glued to the forest floor, it’s also easy to get disorientated, and inevitably, every year there are sansai hunters who require professional rescue teams to get them out. Please contact us at Hokkaido Nature Tours - where we specialize in private custom-made tours - for a safe, reliable and informative sansai picking experience.





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2. Practice Sustainability

As with all food picked from forests and wilderness areas, it's critically important to do so sustainably. With sansai picking, try not to pick more than you intend to eat and always leave the root systems intact for next year's harvest.

3. Before You Go

It's recommended to dress properly for sansai picking as you'll be venturing into wilderness areas. That means you should wear long sleeves, proper footwear, bring rain gear, emergency food supplies, emergency blankets, plenty of water and always notify someone that you're heading out & when you plan on returning.

4. Poisonous Plants & Bear Attacks

However, be forewarned that sansai picking is not without its dangers! For one, there are poisonous plants that resemble edible sansai, such as the popular *gyojya nin-niku* (alpine leek). Secondly - and especially in Hokkaido - there is the danger of running into Higuma brown bears. Sansai hunters often venture far from hiking trails and deep into the wilderness to find secret patches that are unknown to others. At the same time, bears are waking from their winter of hibernation, and are similar to staggering drunks on a weekend in the Susukino nightlife district of Sapporo: disorientated, sluggish and easily triggered. Bears waking from hibernation are literally starving, and they must reach lower altitudes to feast on the very same sansai prized by locals. Tragically, Hokkaido averages approximately 1 sansai bear attack every 2 years. Most often, the disoriented bears have no intention to attack, but are easily agitated in their famished states and act out of self-defense and confusion. It is highly recommended to go sansai picking with another person, either one that is super chatty or a very slow runner! ;) Bring bear bells and whistles to make lots of noise every so often, which is the best way to scare off any lurking Higuma bears. With the proper respect for the dangers of the mountains, sansai picking is no more dangerous than any other outdoor activity.

So get out there while the sansai are young and at their best, or contact us at Hokkaido Nature Tours to include it as part of your custom-made spring tour itinerary for a wonderfully unique Japanese nature & culinary experience!

