



# 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





## Hokkaido Nature Tours Sansai Wild Plants Guide

**S**ansai - 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 12<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> 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!

