



Episode 461: Sam Thayer on Foraging and Wild Edibles for Health, Conservation and Culinary Uses

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Hello, and welcome to the "Wellness Mama" podcast. I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com and wellnesse.com. That's Wellnesse with an E on the end. It's my personal care line. Did you know that more than half of the plants that you encounter in your daily life outside are actually edible and many of them are really good? I did not know that either. And this episode is all about foraging and wild edibles and how they can be used for health, for culinary uses, and are important for our planet. We can go a lot of directions with this one. But I'm here with Sam Thayer who has been foraging since he was a child and been teaching people to do the same for over 25 years. He's the author of several award-winning books. I'll link to those in the show notes, you guys can find them.

But we go deep on the literally hundreds of species of plants available anywhere in the U.S., it differs by region, obviously, how to learn about them, how to identify them, how to incorporate them into your diet, and why this is such a really cool way to save money, to get a whole lot more micronutrients from your food, and also to get much more in touch with your food supply, which is a really fun thing that we can do as families. We take this one a lot of directions. I learned a lot in this one and am excited to go out into the woods in my own area and start finding food. I hope that you will learn as much as I did. And without further ado, let's join Sam. Sam, welcome to the podcast.

Sam: Thanks for having me on.

Katie: I am excited to learn from you today. And I have a note in my research for this episode that you are very into reptiles and amphibians as well and have been keeping a journal of observation since you were 12, some of which are now deposited in a public museum. Is that accurate?

Sam: It's true.

Katie: That's amazing. So, I guess a good place to start then, you're well known for teaching about foraging and we're gonna go deeper on that today. How did you get into that world, to begin with?

Sam: Well, my parents were Catholics and they had five children, but they weren't that into parenting. And so, we had a lot of, like, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and hot cereal and cold cereal. But I wanted other things. I wanted meat and vegetables. So, I learned to find them on my own. Starting at a young age, I would hear about something you could eat and I never forgot it. And I just held that analogy and just kept slowly accumulating over the years. When I was 12, maybe 11, I discovered that there were books about edible wild plants, and then I really hit the ground running.

Katie: That's incredible. I think this is a topic that maybe has never crossed a lot of people's minds because we're so used to just buying everything from a store. And I would guess there's a pretty tremendous difference when you're talking about consuming wild forage plants from the natural environment versus even the best of the best things we can buy in a store. It sounds like for you this was very much you were looking for the nutrients in these foods, even intuitively at such a young age. But when we were talking about wild foraged foods versus store-bought foods, is there a significant difference in nutrient quality?

Sam: You know, most of the wild foods that I collect have not been analyzed nutritionally, but enough of them have been analyzed in North America and around the world, that we can safely say that, in general, they're two to three times as nutrient-dense. So, it's remarkably more nutrient-dense, and especially when you compare very similar produce items like an American wild persimmon versus a cultivated Japanese

persimmon. The USDA has actually done that analysis. And it's about eight times as nutritionally dense, the wild persimmon is. So I think in most of the plants, you're getting better flavor and you're getting an incredible nutritional punch.

Katie: Wow. And from the health side, I know I've read reports that even in the span of a few generations, our consumption of variety of foods has gone down so drastically and our micronutrient consumption has dropped a lot because so many people are getting the bulk of their calories in food consumption from the same very small amount of foods. And I've seen from the health side, a lot of reports of how we're missing out on really key micronutrients that are vital by not consuming a wider variety of food. So I would guess that there's a tremendous component of this of just the availability of micronutrients that you're getting from wild-sourced food versus just eating the same... Like, for most people, I believe that the stat was about seven to eight vegetables that people eat over and over because they're easy to get at the grocery store?

Sam: Yeah. You know, I hear different statistics, but it's generally somewhere between 7 to 8 to maybe 15 or 20 vegetables that people eat in a typical year. In my household, we eat about 400 different species of vegetable in a typical year. So each plant group has its own nutritional strengths and weaknesses. So you get a really well-rounded nutrition by having a whole bunch of different species. And so foraging allows you to do that. Anywhere you live in the United States, there is 100 to 300 good vegetables worth learning within a short distance of your house.

Katie: I think that's probably more than most people have even considered that exist or are available in any form. That's definitely a bigger number than I had expected. There's literally hundreds that we all would have access to in our local areas, basically.

Sam: Definitely.

Katie: Wow. Okay. So it seems like there's a whole... There's probably, like, a tip of the iceberg type scenario here where for people like those of us used to this paradigm of there are vegetables like broccoli and zucchini and lettuce that we're used to getting from the store, we're probably gonna encounter some really unusual things that perhaps we've maybe never even considered eating when we start foraging. Can you, kind of, walk us through just what are some of maybe the easy entry points when it comes to foraging that people can find at first?

Sam: Well, the way that I encourage people to learn foraging is learn a single plant. Don't think about learning foraging. And I have this written down as, like, my one piece of advice. You know, don't try to learn foraging, just learn one plant. Bite off small pieces at a time. But there are so many different leafy greens that may physically resemble something you're familiar with. Like, we're all familiar with, say, romaine lettuce, right? But I collect probably 50 or 60 different things that are somewhat like and related to romaine lettuce. But

there are other vegetable types that there's nothing to compare them to. So, something that I encourage people to learn as one of their first edibles if they have access to it is black locust flowers. This is a really common tree, easy to identify. And everybody loves the flowers available in huge quantities. But there's nothing like this. It's like a flower you would eat in quantity as if it was a vegetable. We'll make fruit salad that's 50% black locust flowers by volume, or we'll fry the flowers with sweet corn, or we will make chicken soup with black locust flowers. And there's nothing we can really compare it to. So it's really fun culinarily to get to eat foods that you just never even imagined there was something like that.

Katie: I would imagine when people are first exposed to the idea of foraging, you probably hit some resistance from people thinking like how do you know if they're safe? Maybe a lot of these plants are dangerous. Certainly, as kids, we get told, you know, don't eat red berries because they're poisonous. I was told that as a kid or, like, given kind of a fear of anything that didn't come from a grocery store. So how do you address that, like, safety and kind of is it dangerous to forage component when people are new to this?

Sam: Well, you know, I don't get a lot of that because I preach to the choir or I teach the choir how to sing better, right? So when people come to me, it's people that know that they wanna learn wild edibles. Every now and then, I deal with groups of people that are maybe not into foraging or they're not certain they want to do this. And I tell them, the big safety rule is you don't eat something if you don't know what it is. And if you've heard of plant poisonings, they occur when people eat random things without identifying them. Most of us have enough common sense to not do that. But occasionally people just eat a random thing. And that's definitely a no-no. So I tell people use the banana test. Like, if you eat a banana, you're never gonna pick one up and say, "Hey, wait a second, what if this is a false banana?" That's just never gonna happen to you.

And when you're that confident about any produce item, then you're ready to eat it. And at first, it might seem, like, well, I could never be that confident about all these wild green things. There's so many of them. It's just a solid green wall when you're unfamiliar with it. But actually, each and every one of those hundreds of vegetables and fruits that I collect in a year is totally distinct. It can be recognized with absolute certainty. Like, if you see a crowd of people and you don't know anyone in that crowd, they're not distinct to you. But if you see your best friend in that crowd, that best friend is gonna stand out, right? So it's the same with plants. Like, when you don't know it, it's not a thing. When you do know it, it stands out and like it glows almost.

Katie: Are there broad categories to think of when it comes to foraging? Like, greens, we've already talked about. That's definitely a category. What about things like edible mushrooms? Are those forageable in the wild, fruits, berries, roots of things? I'll admit my limited knowledge in this, is the only things I've ever foraged would be dandelion and plantain. So very limited in my experience here, but are there categories people can think in?

Sam: Absolutely. So any type of produce that you can imagine that you could find in a store, there's something like that in the wild. So, broccoli, that's a cluster of unopened flower buds. There are dozens, maybe in low hundreds of unopened flower bud clusters that I collect and eat, right? So, a shoot vegetable like asparagus.

Again, there are hundreds of shoot vegetables like asparagus, you know, leafy greens, and I like to separate leafy greens into bitter greens, which lettuce would be a bitter green, dandelion would be a bitter green. And then mild greens, examples would be, like, spinach, lambs quarters, nettles. And then hot greens or spicy greens, mostly those are mustards. You know, then there would be groups like nuts. You know, we're all familiar with pecans. Pecan is one of 11 species of hickory native to Eastern North America, and all of them are edible. They're all slightly different. Some aren't as good as pecans, but some are better than pecans. And then we have, you know, root vegetables. There's tubers, potato-like vegetables. There is tap root vegetables, carrot-shaped, or parsnips-shaped vegetables. And each one of those categories, there are dozens of wild edibles.

Katie: Wow. And so, I'm guessing that the variety really varies based on where you're located. And probably in some areas, this is much easier than others, for instance, people who live in a more natural setting or have access to a lot of land. Is this still possible in suburban settings or even, like, cities?

Sam: You know, I grew up in a city of about 50,000, for the first half of my childhood. In the second half, in a city of about 250,000. And I've done foraging workshops in small towns of 200 people and I've done foraging in Detroit, in New York City, in Washington, D.C. Urban foraging is essentially the same, regardless of the size of the municipality you're in. And there is a whole bunch of stuff to forage in any urban area. Now, there's, of course, the legal question is, where are you allowed to forage? And that's another question. But as far as it being a place to forage, every city has great foraging. Rural people have access to a greater variety of foods and more land per person. You know, most rural people, if they don't have their own land, they know people who have land. And so you have access to a greater volume of fruits or vegetables or whatever, but it's really something that anybody can do.

Katie: And you've brought up the legality of it. That was gonna be one of my questions is how can we find out if this is legal or in where it is legal in our own areas?

Sam: You know, this is a big, confusing, gray area that those of us who are teaching foraging have been working on and, kind of, frustrated over for years. Like, there's not, for example, one rule for all national parks, every national park has its own rules, which vary from no foraging to, you can pick mushrooms and berries, to, some of them allow quite a bit of picking. It depends on where you are. Alaska has very liberal foraging laws on public lands. National Forests tend to allow you to collect everything but root vegetables. So you really have to learn in the specific area that you're foraging. But if you're walking down a path in a public park and there's a mulberry tree, and you pick some mulberries up that tree, probably nobody is gonna care. And I'll admit that I've done this all my life, never even knowing if it's okay or not okay. You know, I'm fishing, oh, there's a mulberry tree. I'm gonna use some mulberries. And I've never worried about it and it's never been a problem.

Katie: What about the safety aspect on the health and wellness side? My mind goes to the idea that in a lot of municipalities, especially, but even outside of those now they spray pesticides and herbicides quite a bit. Is there any way to know or gauge if that's happened in an area or safety precautions when you don't know?

Sam: I'm glad you brought that up because I would have brought that up next. As far as foraging, after identifying the plants you eat, herbicides and pesticides is the number one safety issue. And it has gotten a lot worse in the last 30 years. Most people are not aware of how extensively, especially herbicides are being sprayed now. You need to, one, look at the vegetation. Is there any sign that this might have been sprayed because usually within 24 hours, there's pretty significant signs that vegetation has been sprayed? And it's best to forage in a place you know where you know what goes on. You know, I'm lucky that I collect on my property. But it's a constant thing, every time I'm picking plants, I'm thinking, "Is there a reason to think this might have been sprayed?" You know, I have some acquaintances that are organic farmers and I collect on that property knowing that it's safe. I know when they spray the rural roads where I live on and I know what parts they spray. But this is something very important to keep track of because a lot of people don't realize, they're aerially spraying herbicide on a lot of woodlands, for example. So you could be in a national forest collecting far from any human habitation, and there could be herbicide on those plants. And it's scary and it's getting scarier.

Katie: Why do you think that's increasing? Because that definitely is scary to think that even from just an ambient perspective, that we're living in these environments that are being sprayed aerially or just massively sprayed? Why are we seeing an increase in that?

Sam: Well, one is this tool, you know, managing vegetation with chemicals rather than mechanically. This only came about in the 1960s on a large scale and it's just becoming more and more prevalent as people realize how effectively they can manage vegetation by killing with chemicals. And that's just the unfortunate reality. And the other thing is, as we have created herbicide-ready plants, roundup ready plants through genetic engineering, that makes it easier for farmers to spray. So a lot of work that farmers used to do with the plow, they now do with herbicide. And it saves them time, but it also puts a lot of toxins into the world. I mean, these are anti-life chemicals and they can't be good for us.

Katie: I definitely have seen the data about how both herbicides and now plastic chemicals have been identified in even very remote areas of the world even under ice. So we're reaching a very dangerous level of planetary saturation when it comes to this. And from the health side, we know that these have an impact on the human body as well. I used to live in a pretty rural area, and I would see them spray, especially the monocropping areas of soybean, and corn, and wheat, and nothing else lived in that area. It was just dead soil when it wasn't growing something and it's really sad to see because I think that's become so synonymous with our food supply. And it speaks volumes to this diversity that we've lost and how it's happening in the natural landscape, as well. Do you see any hope for reversing that or stopping this widescale use of that?

Sam: You know, honestly, I think foragers are a big part of that. Like, we need to get our voices out there and say, "Hey, you could be killing us. You could be poisoning us." And also, I do think that the media needs to get on the ball and start reporting about the amount of spraying that's going on. So we're mostly aware that it's being sprayed heavily on agricultural lands. But there are millions of acres of Texas, for example, that are sprayed on a regular basis from airplanes to kill off mesquite to increase its grazing potential. There's millions of acres of public forest land, where they do what they call a shelter woodcut. And they cut out oak trees and they spray the understory so the oaks can regenerate better. And this is just...

I mean, I was at a state park in Florida, there is a hiking trail, and they spray both sides of the hiking trail through a marsh to kill off all the vegetation along the hiking trail because people don't wanna be so close to plants. Maybe they're afraid there's a snake hiding in there. Those are places when I was a kid, I would have, you know, collected stuff along the hiking trail. But it's important to keep in mind that our world is inundated with this. You can't avoid this by not foraging. Foraging intelligently is a way that you can selectively eat foods that are not sprayed unless you're eating strictly organic produce, you're being exposed to a lot of pesticide residue. And unless somebody lives in an agricultural area, I think most urban people are not aware of how heavily sprayed agricultural lands are today.

Katie: Yeah, definitely something to be aware of in our own individual communities. And I'm a big believer that the best change happens on a wide scale, but at grassroots scale, that if we are all aware of this and interacting in our local communities that could go a lot farther, a lot faster toward creating change, than if we were just focusing on at the federal level. And I think it's really important to really focus on our local areas, and to your point, to learn about our local areas and just have that conversation. It's really scary to think that most people are not even aware of this, but yet we're all being exposed through the use of these kind of things.

Sam: I have a whole set of hundreds of photographs of herbicide spraying I've been actually collecting over the last decade, all kinds of situations, especially emphasizing on the ones where there is no purpose for it or it's destructive. So they're spraying the sides of roads and they're killing the plants that hold the roads in place, and then floods come or rains come, erode the road and they're having to repair roadways because they're spraying to eliminate the plants that would have prevented that erosion. You know, stuff like that is going on. So it's almost like you give a little kid a BB gun, and they just go outside and start shooting birds unless you tell them not to. And I think we've given, you know, 20 million people a backpack sprayer and they're just spraying stuff because it's neat to watch it die.

Katie: Yeah, that's sad to think about. And I guess as an analogy, I live in a coastal area and there's more awareness here of the importance, like you mentioned, the plants protecting the roadways, even in their root structures being important for that. And people are more aware of that, I think in reference to the coastal areas because they understand that the dunes are protected against storms and hurricanes and protecting the sand and the beaches. But that same concept applies, like you said, in every ecosystem. And I don't think people really think about that and just how vital those plants are not just to, we all understand creating oxygen that we breathe, but there are so many effects that ripple out beyond just that.

Sam: Yeah, and a lot of plants are being eliminated from most of their habitat by roadside spraying. So, we probably don't want to spend too long on this, but it brings me to an important thought, it just is that people often see foragers as being detrimental to ecology. And really foragers have the opposite history. We've been the people that see what is going on, and with a deeply appreciative, constant interaction with nature that creates this thing called gratitude within every forager that makes them staunch conservationists.

Katie: That was gonna be on my list of questions as well, was the environmental and conservation side of this. Because I'm assuming when you're foraging, you're not taking all of a plant. You're not depleting a natural supply of something. Like, are there guidelines about the amount of a plant you should take to make sure it is able to remain and grow? I mean, obviously, the greens and smaller ones, there might be a difference there than when we're talking like trees or vegetables, but are there guidelines related to making sure we're doing this in an ecologically friendly conservational way?

Sam: You know, it really depends on what the plant is. So one, we have invasive plants that are not supposed to be here and they say, you know, "Eat as many as you possibly can." But there are other plants that, you know, can handle differing amounts of harvest. It depends on what you're harvesting. If you're harvesting a root vegetable, then you're having...you know, you're killing the plant to get that root vegetable. If you're harvesting leafy greens, you're stealing some of the energy from the plant, but you are not necessarily killing the plant. When you're harvesting fruits and nuts and berries, the plant is making those as a gift for you to transport the seeds. And you can consummate that gift by transporting the seeds and give the plant all the benefit, in fact, more benefit than it probably ever dreamed of. If you're doing it, you know, carefully as a human being, you've got a lot of power that way. And you can still take that fruit, that's what the plant made it for.

You know, but every forager through this natural process of hand to mouth creates appreciation, creates awareness, and starts to act rightly. I think we need more of that. I have a butterfly conservation group telling me that I shouldn't be promoting eating milkweed. And I said, "I appreciate your concern but actually, we need to promote people eating milkweed because everybody that eats milkweed has a milkweed patch." I've got a quarter acre milkweed patch that I manage because we eat milkweed. And I was watching the monarchs lay eggs on my milkweed just a couple days ago. And sometimes we don't think about this rationally. I've had people telling me, "Don't use a blueberry rake because it damages the plants." Well, how do you manage blueberries? You burn them. Right? So, you eliminate the entire portion of the plant above ground every three to five years. And that's how blueberries thrive. So it's not reasonable to think that accidentally pulling off a few leaves is gonna harm the blueberry population.

Katie: And it seems like this just leads to such a deeper, more intimate relationship with your food supply, which is definitely a thing that's been so lost in modern society. And I've been a big proponent of gardening, just to encourage people to have a relationship with their food supply at all. And I think there's so many benefits of interacting with the soil and spending time outside and knowing where your food came from. And

especially with kids, them seeing that process versus thinking that food just comes from a grocery store. And I think it seems like foraging is a whole other level beyond that as well. Like, I've never even tried milkweed. What does it taste like? What are some of the benefits of eating milkweed?

Sam: Well, so milkweed, one, it needs to be cooked. You should not eat it raw. It tastes a lot like green beans. But it's an awesome plant to grow. It's perennial. Once you have a patch, you'll have it forever. It has a shoot that's asparagus-like in the spring. And then it has a cluster of flower buds, broccoli-like. And then after that, it'll produce the pod. When the pod is like half of its full size is when you eat the pod. So you've got three good food products on one plant. But we only protect what we love and we only love what we know. And so, if we're gonna protect nature, we need to know it, like, intimately and deeply. And there's a lot of ways to do that. But I think that foraging is the most effective way. And it's what our ancestors did for hundreds of thousands of years. And they showed us that people can forage sustainably for a long time and that still applies today.

Katie: And you mentioned coming from a big family. I have six kids as well. And a lot of people listening have children. I'm guessing there's also, if this is done correctly, a good cost-benefit of learning to forage or cultivating these more natural plants. Like you said, you have a milkweed patch. And that has multiple different seasons that you can eat it in different ways. But what are some of the financial advantages to learning to forage or to interact more with these native plant species?

Sam: Well, we don't buy vegetables for about seven months of the year. We do have a vegetable garden, but more of that comes from foraging, you know. Last year we picked 83 gallons of blueberries, and that's worth a lot of money. But also, a lot of that time that we were not doing some expensive recreational activity, you know, we got all of the kids, we picked blueberries for three hours, we go swimming, and that's our afternoon and we come back with several gallons of absolutely wonderful super nutritious food.

Katie: And I also think, okay, so some of the objections that I would guess people are maybe having if they're like, "Okay, this makes sense logically. This is a good idea." But is it a lot of work? Is this something that we can learn to do or is it like a tremendous amount of work to have to go forage? Is it like...? People are used to the easy idea of going to the grocery store. I'm guessing when you learn it and you can recognize these plants, like your friend, it's not as intensive as people might think, but how much work actually goes into the process of foraging?

Sam: Some foraging things are a lot of work. But, you know, the work is different when it's fun. It doesn't feel like work to me to go pick blueberries because I just absolutely love doing it. But if you don't like it, don't do it. I don't know anybody that forages that doesn't enjoy it. So, the work aspect, kind of, becomes irrelevant in my mind. Now, there are some things that you might go and harvest and say, "Hey, that was pretty good but that wasn't worth my time." Well, then don't do it. But as far as certain vegetables, shoot vegetables, and leafy greens, I can go pick them on my property, much quicker than I could go to the grocery store and buy them. So I get better food for free in less time. So it's a win every way I look at it.

Katie: Better food for free in less time. That would appeal I would think to anybody listening.

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I think the other thing that people may wonder is taste-wise, how do these plants compare to what people are used to in the grocery store? Because I've actually found, I think a lot of the foods people eat and get used to are very bland. And I personally love exploring new culinary things, especially, like, different plant foods because they have so much flavor, especially I would guess even more so when you forage them. But for people who are used to maybe more store-bought produce, what is the taste difference like? And is that hard to adapt to or do you find people actually really love that, from the beginning getting to try all the new flavors?

Sam: One of the trickiest parts with wild edibles, particularly with the vegetables, is the seasons can be very short. So we bred our domestic plants to grow very slowly so that their season of light that they're perfect for

harvest is longer. But with wild plants, usually when they're picked at the optimum time, usually people find that they are better than cultivated vegetables or store-bought vegetables. And yes, a lot of our store-bought stuff is very bland. We have bred flavor and nutrients out of our vegetables to make them larger and easier to digest, which was really important when our ancestors had trouble feeding themselves. But today, we don't have a lot of trouble feeding ourselves. The nutrient density and the flavor density is really a plus. So a lot of people today that I know, they do forage to add exciting flavors, and exciting, just different produce textures, you know, to their diet.

Katie: And I think a really big piece of this that definitely can't be overlooked in a conversation about foraging, is I mentioned a little in the beginning, but how detached we've become from our food and from knowledge about food. And I think this is definitely contributing to... I mean, I talk a lot about the nutrition and health side and all of the chronic disease rates we're seeing. But I think a really big philosophical part of this is that we are meant to be connected to our food supply and this loss of knowledge in such a short amount of time. Like, I think of talking to my husband's grandmother, for instance, only a couple generations back, and she had so much more knowledge of these things. And she could go into the woods and get plants and eat them. She could garden almost anything. She had a very just intuitive, deep relationship with her food and where it came from.

And it seems really sad to me that we've lost that in such a short amount of time. But I also really feel like maybe this is a step, understanding our interaction with nature with our food better is a step toward healing that process, especially when we're talking about the people listening who have kids and letting our kids have that relationship with nature with their food from a very young age. But have you found that as well that, like, we're seeing, kind of, negative ripple effects from this loss of understanding and connection with our food supply?

Sam: I agree with everything you just said 100%. I could just reflect it all back. Perfectly said.

Katie: So on a practical level, do you have some good, like, maybe quick I know you have resources and I would love for you to explain some of the places people can find to keep learning about this. But any quick starting points that are maybe, like, easy practice, baby steps to start learning a few plants that are going to be safe, easy ones, it's kind of getting a foot in the water?

Sam: Well, you know, it's always a little bit tricky because I don't know what people have available to them because what's ever in your backyard is the best thing to learn first. So, again, just I reiterate, learn one plant, learn it well, and then after that, you can move to the next one. And it's best to look for a plant that you've seen many times so you already recognize it but you don't know its name. And if you don't have a plant that stands out to you, just go look around your yard, your house, a park you frequent until some plant really catches your fancy and try to identify it. Once you identify a plant, then you can look up and find out if it's edible. There's about a 50/50 chance that it's gonna be a food plant. And so, you know, once you've identified it and found out and confirmed that it's edible, then you can think about trying it.

But it's important to remember that once you build this relationship with a plant, you'll have it for the rest of your life. And if you learn three plants in a year, it doesn't take that long, and you have a pretty good number of... You know, you could have doubled the amount of vegetables you eat in just a few years. You know, purslane is extremely easy to identify and available to most people. I mean, we can't identify it for people on the air, just a common garden weed with succulent leaves, it's incredibly nutritious and most people really like it. You know, shepherd's purse is another one, very common weed, considered one of the most prevalent agricultural weeds in the world. That's a wintergreen in the southern half of the United States at least. And that's a mild-tasting mustard. That's a great one to start with. But really, there's a lot of common stuff everywhere. It depends on what part of the country you're in.

Katie: Okay, that makes sense. And there's some of these ones you've mentioned. I've heard of some of these in, like, the medicinal natural remedies, that's like some of these plants are powerful enough that they're used in concentrated forms, from my understanding, to help people with very specific things. And I feel like native cultures had such a much better understanding of that. And it's so fun to me to get to go back and read some of those things and see how they use the things they had on hand and plants. The one I always tell moms, and you can correct me, there might be a better way to do this, but in most places, some form of plantain grows on the ground. And in our family, any time there's mosquito bites, bee stings, even sunburn, we go find plantain and, like, acutely, you can just chew it up and spit it on the bite and it helps with the itching so quickly. But I even made tinctures for sunburn or for skin irritation from that. And that's the plant that most people have in their backyard and just don't know how to interact with.

Sam: Yeah. And I agree with what you said there. I'll take plantain if I get a cut on my foot, I'll put the plantain in the blender, and then I'll take that paste and put it on my cut and replace it a couple times during the day. It seems like it really helps them heal. So there's a lot... I mean, there's just so much that plants around us can offer us and you only need to go as far as you're comfortable going.

Katie: I think also it might help to put in perspective for people who are maybe still, like, afraid of what's out there and afraid of doing it the wrong way. Is there any rough guideline about what percentage of what we interact with? I know it might vary by environment, but it's actually edible. Like, is the majority actually edible versus not, or what is the chance of us accidentally getting something that's gonna legitimately kill us?

Sam: Well, there's only a few plants in North America that are dangerous to the point where, like, if you accidentally ate a little bit, it would kill you. In fact, as far as leafy greens, there's almost nothing. Most of the plant poisonings come from water hemlock and poison hemlock, which have large roots that look like they wanna be carrots. I mean, they look inviting, but they're very toxic. Those aren't by any means rare plants. I mean, in some places are very common. But most of the vegetation is just not really poisonous, not really edible. Even if I was to point out an edible plant, say an apple tree, you can't eat most of that tree, you only eat the fruit and only when it's ripe.

But looking at landscapes in much of North America, half or more of the plants are actually legitimate food plants. Some places, like, if you just took a woodland in Tennessee, it's gonna be dominated by oaks, and hickories, and maples, all of which produce something that's edible. You know, even pines, you know, there's pine pollen, there's pine bark, and you can make pine needle tea. So, like, this edible stuff is all around us. And some people are surprised to hear that. But I remind people, we're omnivores. We are meant to eat plants. A lot of plants. A pig is an omnivore. And nobody would be surprised that a pig had a long list. Nobody would be surprised that a black bear had a long list. And we shouldn't be surprised that human beings have a long list. We are meant to be eating wild plants. And there's a whole lot of different wild plants that are not only edible but excellent. I don't teach people to eat things, the ones I think they're "food worthy." If it's just barely edible, I'm not gonna waste your time with it.

Katie: That's good to know. That's amazing. Do you do anything with foraging mushrooms? I know that's its whole own different kingdom of learning. But I've also seen statistics and I might be off on this that the majority of even mushrooms are actually edible but you do definitely wanna be careful with the ones that aren't, but is that something that you do as well?

Sam: Yeah, I collect about 40 to 45 different species of mushroom. I'm not an expert by any means. It sounds like a lot. But, you know, if I was to take you out for a walk in the woods, I would know a lot of the mushrooms we see, but I would not know a lot of the other mushrooms. And again, you eat the ones that you know are edible. Where people run into problems with mushrooms is mostly people who think that, "Hey, you can eat wild mushrooms," and they just, you know, without knowing what they are, they think, "I heard you can eat wild mushrooms and here's a wild mushroom." Well, actually, no, there's thousands of different kinds. You have to eat the kinds that are correct. But as long as you follow the same guidelines, only eat something when you're certain of what it is. Mushrooms are safe just like plants. There are some very dangerous mushrooms just like plants. There are more mushroom poisonings than plant poisonings. And I think that's because there are more people that just think, "Hey, it's okay to just eat a mushroom without identifying it."

Katie: Good to know. I'm curious if there are any kid favorites at your house. I know it varies by location. So it wouldn't apply to necessarily every family, but maybe like good entries of natural foraged foods to try that kids especially love.

Sam: Well, literally as we speak on June 14th, my kids are in the yard picking wild strawberries right now. We're gonna make strawberry shortcake later, like wild strawberries, which, if you want something that's delicious, I mean, if you like strawberries, wild strawberries are like the same thing, just way intensified. Some listeners are probably thinking, "I have wild strawberries and they're flavorless." Those flavorless ones are false strawberries. They're edible. They're safe. They're just very low in flavor. But the real wild strawberry is outrageously delicious. My kids love them. But really, they love most of the berries that we pick, you know, blueberries, serviceberries, blackberries, red and black raspberries. Honestly, there's not much that I like that my kids don't like. When you get kids out there and they participate in the process of getting produce, they're usually pretty excited to eat that produce.

Katie: Yeah, that's true. I've seen that with gardening, and it would make sense it would apply here as well. A friend of ours has a mulberry tree. And it's been one of my favorite things this year to see the kids just climb the mulberry tree, eat mulberries, come home covered, like, red all over their face from the mulberries all over their feet. And they're so happy and they're so much more delicious than anything you can buy in a store. So, that's very small scale. But I'm excited to start really delving into some of these other ones and trying so many new things. Do you have any good recommended resources as a starting point for people to start learning about their own individual areas and just about foraging in general?

Sam: You know, there's been a lot of good foraging books that have come out in the last 10 years. So, there's different regional foraging guides. And, you know, I know I'm touting myself here, but I think my three books are pretty good. Rather than cover a whole bunch of species, I have a chapter for each plant. So it's anywhere from 3 to 15 pages on the plant to try to give you all the information you need to feel comfortable. And there are a lot of local foraging instructors, have popped up in the last decade or so. All over the country, there are some areas where there aren't any close by and there's others where there are. So you'll have to just search online for that. But there are some great foraging instructors out there. That's the easiest way to learn is directly from a person who knows the plants already.

Katie: Well, I'll definitely put links to your books in the show notes. That's wellnessmama.fm for you guys listening so people can find those. And local foraging workshops sounds like a great field trip to do with kids or homeschool activity or even just to get a couple families together and go learn. I think kids especially would probably be so engaged and love getting to learn about their natural environment and see it in a new way or even just make tea out of pine needles. It would probably be such a fun experience for most kids, I would guess.

Sam: Kids love it. I mean, and you say, you know, collecting mulberries is small scale. It's the perfect scale, though. That's exactly, I mean, the way to introduce yourself to foraging. I mean, and it's such a great intergenerational activity. You know, kids and parents can do it together and spend a lot of quality time together outdoors, getting exercise, and healthy food. I really can't find anything wrong with it.

Katie: Well, I'll make sure those resources are in the show notes. You guys definitely check them out and dive in, in your local area. A question I love to ask toward the end of interviews, somewhat selfishly, because I'm always looking for suggestions is if there is a book or a number of books that have had a profound impact on your life, and if so, what they are and why?

Sam: Well, I read a lot of books and my list is probably kind of nerdy. But when I started to learn plants as a child and then I came across a book called, "The Vegetation of Wisconsin," and it's actually an ecological book about plant communities and how they go together, it really opened my eyes to understanding what I was seeing outside. And that book really set me down a path of understanding the ecology around me. And I

encourage people to just read whatever you can about the ecology, plant community, plant and animal communities, wherever you live because it's the big story that the human story is written on top of. And sometimes we can forget that it's there because, kind of, like, gravity, it just hides in plain sight.

Katie: I love that. Okay. Well, I'll make sure all those things are linked. You guys definitely follow it. And I would love to hear from you guys listening if you get into foraging, how your experience is. I think this is a really, really cool way to interact with our world in a way that many of us haven't before and to get a much more nutritious, less expensive food supply, and hopefully learn a lot and spend some family time in the process. So, Sam, thank you for sharing all this knowledge today. This has been fun. I've learned a whole lot. This is a new area for me, and I'm excited to jump in and explore myself.

Sam: Well, thanks for having me.

Katie: And thanks as always to you guys for listening and sharing your most valuable resources, your time, and your energy with us today. We're both so grateful that you did, and I hope that you will join me again on the next episode of the "Wellness Mama" podcast.

If you're enjoying these interviews, would you please take two minutes to leave a rating or review on iTunes for me? Doing this helps more people to find the podcast, which means even more moms and families could benefit from the information. I really appreciate your time, and thanks as always for listening.