

Foraging Ecology with @BlackForager, Alexis Nikole Nelson

Ologies Podcast

May 18, 2021

Oh heeey, it's your friend's cat who just had a \$600 hairball, Alie Ward, back with an outdoorsy, quite frankly, a scrumptious episode of *Ologies*. So this Ologist – we're going to get right to it – studied both science and performance at Ohio State University. But the role most know her in is teacher of the “Can I Eat This? It Grew in my Driveway” arts and sciences. She has a million – a literal million – TikTok watchers who just eat up her lessons on making violet simple syrup, and magnolia cookies, and garlic mustard pesto, and more. And I have had so many of y'all begging me to have her on that when I DM'd her, honestly I was shocked to get a response. This woman is busy!

So we recorded this right as April was turning into May, and since it's still spring and things are still blooming, and shooting, and crawling from the ground, it's time to grab a basket and see what's for dinner. But we also talk about year-round edibles. We're going to get into it!

But first, thank you to all the Patrons who submitted their questions. You can become a patron for a dollar a month – *a dollar a month* – at Patreon.com/Ologies. Thank you to everyone rating and subscribing to the podcast. Thanks to everyone who has already bought a ticket to my first, and maybe only ever, Live Show. It's Tuesday, May 18th, 5pm Pacific. Tickets are between \$9 and \$12. They're available in the link in the show notes. There's a discount code for patrons.

Thanks to everyone who leaves such nice reviews, keeping *Ologies* in the Top 5 science podcasts globally, which is bananas. I read all the reviews, and each week I pick a fresh one. This week it's from Bkcbkc6, who, after listening to the Speech Pathology episode, wrote in to say:

I have just ordered 2 sets of the recordable buttons for my human son. Amazing what I picked up from this podcast after just discovering it! Going to share a set with his teachers and work as a team to augment his language. Thanks so much!

So yes, I read all your reviews, from Katie's, who's going back to school. That made me cry. Diane who loves a good tortoise dick fact, wig makers, former podcast loathers. Thanks, everyone, for leaving them. They really do get me through days when I think I'm not doing a good enough job, which is like every day, but that's my own problem.

Anyway, speaking of: I know you want to get to this interview. Foraging Ecology. Foraging comes from a *root* for hay, or straw, or fodder, and then it evolved to mean 'hunting about for edibles'. And ecology comes from the same root as oikology, for 'the place we live' and our relationship to our environment. So, foraging for the things around us.

Now, for breakfast, sidenote, I just want you to know that I ate some loquats that I stole from a friend's tree. She didn't even know she could eat them. She thought they were ornamental. So, we're doing a good job today. Anyway, pull up a stump and lean in for a bounty of information on edible versus poisonous plants, taproots, blossoms, tinctures, brews and stews, and cookies, and cocktails, and hikes, and eating invasive species; some dog pee talk, the best guidebooks, and how gathering what grows around us is a radical act for internet hero, and teacher, autodidact, wild food maker, and your gathering guide. You know her on TikTok, and YouTube, and Instagram as @BlackForager, Alexis Nikole Nelson.

Alexis Nelson: I'm so excited to be talking to you!

Hello. My name is Alexis Nikole Nelson, and my pronouns are she, her, hers. And my cat just clawed me in the butt. What a good time we're having already.

Alie Ward: *[laughs]* Get him on the mic!

Alexis: Yeah. *[to the cat]* Hey Ozzy. You have words to say? Use your words! *[laughs]*

Alie: Oh my gosh, people have been asking me for so many months to get you on this podcast. When you wrote back, I was thrilled! I've been wanting to do this topic for a while, which would be Foraging Ecology, I believe. Right?

Alexis: Yes! Foraging Ecology, I think, is the -ology that we settled on for this.

Alie: Yes! It works. It totally works. Your TikTok's amazing, and informative, and you're so prolific, and it's so great. At what point were you like, "Okay, it's time the world needs to know what they can eat in their backyards."?

Alexis: I mean, I've honestly felt that way ever since I was really little. I guess I just didn't have the tools to tell anybody outside of my parents, family members, friends, anyone who I could get to listen to me in person.

Alie: Do you remember what the first thing was you ate out of the ground? And were you safe? Was it dangerous?

Alexis: The first thing I remember eating out of the ground, I must've been about five years old, and I was helping my mom in the garden in our old house in Cincinnati. And she pointed out some grass, but it looked different from other grass, and she broke it and it smelled delicious. It smelled like onions and garlic, and she's like, "Oh yeah, it's onion grass, and it's edible, but it's not as good as the onions and the garlic that we get from the store." And if you tell a five-year-old that something is edible, they're going to put it in their face and they're going to get really excited about it. So I did, and it just kind of ignited a gentle obsession. A lifelong love.

Alie: Where did you get a lot of your information? Did you start getting... For your sixth birthday did you get an encyclopedia of edible herbs? How did the information dump start?

Alexis: Well, my answer to that question is yes, but for my eighth birthday.

Alie: Oh, got it! A little late. Late bloomer!

Alexis: I know! Oh my gosh, I was so late to the game! I just inhaled all of my mom's books on gardening. My mom had an entire shelf in our house dedicated to just her gardening books, and yeah, I'd say by the time I was eight or nine I had read each of them front to back, was trying to memorize every single one of the trees, and flowers, and herbs present in them. And when I was done with those, I bought more. Every weekend my parents used to let me go to this independent bookstore in Cincinnati, Joseph-Beth, after we'd go out to dinner, and they'd be like, "Okay, you get *one* book." And it'd be really hard for me to choose between, oh gosh, whatever fantasy novel I was obsessed with at the time or a plant book.

Alie: When it came time to figuring out your life's course, did you want to stick with botany? Did you decide to go more of a business route? I know that you have been a social media manager, which explains another reason why you're, like, so good at TikTok. You're a professional. But what did you decide when it came to figuring out, you know, careers?

Alexis: I think I'm still deciding. Every time I have to remember that I'm a real adult, I'm just like, "Oh yeah. 28's real. I can't fudge it anymore." Definitely a full-blooded adult now.

Growing up, in the fourth grade when we had to draw what we wanted to be when we grew up, I said that I wanted to be a geneticist by day and a pop star by night. *[laughs]*

Alie: I love it.

Alexis: I feel like this is closer than anybody, myself included, thought I was going to get, kind of melding this aspect of performance – which I've always loved. Right hand-in-hand with my love of plants has been my love of entertaining people. And when it came time to choose what I was going to major in in college, I was pretty gifted in math and science, but I was also pretty gifted in theater. But nobody tells you to major in theater. Even when you're really good at theater, no one tells you to go and major in theater. So everyone was like, "Oh my gosh, you're a woman of color. You're good at math. You're good at science. If you don't become an engineer, what a waste!"

And I didn't know if I wanted to be an engineer, but I did know that I didn't want to be a waste. So I applied to all of my schools as an engineer, got accepted to Ohio State as an environmental engineering major.

Aside: On the first day of her schooling as an environmental engineer, the dean addressed the students just to tell them that most people will quit the program, about half. Which is about as opposite of a pep talk as you can possibly get. Like, "Welcome. This is going to suck. You'll hate my program." Attrition, perhaps, should not be something to brag about, but what do I know?

Alexis: And I've always loved the pursuit of knowledge, but I've always hated when some sort of, like, very competitive aspect has been thrown into it. So, needless to say, I had a rough time my first year in engineering school. So rough that I took a semester off to, kind of, get my head right, and decided that I did love math and science, but that I also loved writing. I also loved performing. So I came back and focused on both environmental science because I didn't take all of that calculus, and physics, and chemistry for nothing. *[laughs]* But then I also went and got a theater degree and took, like, master's classes in playwriting, put on a one-woman show before I graduated, wrote a couple of short plays. So I feel like everything I'm doing right now makes sense.

And in terms of where I see it going in the future, any opportunity that I get to talk to large groups of people about the value in the green spaces around them, that's how I would define the career that I want to see myself in at any given time during the rest of my life. And if that's as a TikToker, that's great. If that's, oh my god, on a TV show (Hey PBS!), that's great too. If it's writing field guides and books, that's great too. I just... This is what fills my cup, and this is the type of thing that even when I'm working really hard, it doesn't feel like work. *["It's the best thing."]*

Alie: Did you ever think that you'd have a million people tuning in to watch you make pesto?

Alexis: No! *[laughs]* Never in a million years. I made my foraging account on Instagram originally because I was annoying my friends with the plants I was eating.

Alie: *[laughs]* They were like, "We don't want to hear about it."

Alexis: Yeah. They were like, "No thank you." So I was like, "Okay, I'll just make a Finsta but just for the wild things that I put on my plate." Now I feel like my personal account is my Finsta. Kind of a weird switch-a-rooney that I never in a million years would've called.

Aside: Sidenote: A Finsta, for those of us not born in the '90s, is a Fake Instagram, or an alternative handle that's not, like, one that your boss follows or something your followers

would find off-brand. So perhaps it's the real you, which makes me want to sit on a rock and ponder, "Am I living my most Finsta life in the out and the open? And why not?"

Anyway, Alexis had an underground passion for plants, and at the start of the pandemic she posted something to her TikTok about foraging if you couldn't get to the store during the first few weeks of the covid lockdown. And she posted it, she woke up to tens of thousands of views, and suddenly people were smitten, not only with her plucky delivery but her extensive botanical knowledge. Millions of views later, she's really opened up people's eyes, and noses, and mouths to edibles that we walk right past all the time, all year round.

Alie: It's been really cool to see the seasons change and to see different things that you're harvesting. Persimmons, and then going into blossoms and stuff. When it comes to keeping yourself educated, are you looking things up before you're foraging? Are you already familiar with them? Does it really depend on the region? How are you keeping all of this knowledge? How often do you have to sharpen those tools?

Alexis: I think it's constantly a process of sharpening, and the more you interact with a certain plant, just like the more you interact with certain people, you get to know them better, you know their nuances better, you know when to expect them. So there's definitely a swath of plants that I've worked with for a really long time. I know when to expect, like, apples and all of the other rose family trees to start blooming. I know when dandelions are coming up; I know when violets are coming up.

There are definitely plants that I'm a bit newer to that I have to go and do a little bit of digging, a little bit of reading. Or my favorite, I see that someone else in one of the regional foraging Facebook groups I'm in is posting about them and I'll be like, "Oh, I did not know that we were already in cow parsnip season." (I did know we were already in cow parsnip season. That's just the first plant that came to my head.)

Aside: Of course she knew. Also, more on those densely hairy perennials later.

Alexis: And that's been wonderful, being able to have that community to always come back to. But I'm always re-reading all of my foraging books. All of these poor books, their covers are just bent as all get out because whenever I have some free time, or if it's before bed, I'll just flip one open, do a little bit of reading. I feel like I notice something new every single time I read one of my foraging books, so it makes sense to go back over them again. It's just like when you're in school, you have to keep practicing or you'll lose it. Use it or lose it! That is the TLDR.

Aside: Maybe you don't know what TLDR means, and that's fine. It stands for "Too Long. Didn't Read," ICYMI, in case you missed it. So, Alexis is schooling us on internet culture at large, as well as precious, overlooked botany.

Alie: A question that's on my mind a lot when I watch your TikToks: How do you know if something's peed on it?

Alexis: *[laughs]* I do sniff, because if it smells like fresh pee, that's just, like, not appetizing at all. The answer to this question, and I know, Alie, that it is not the answer that *anybody* wants, is: If it's out in a green space, odds are, at some point in time in that green space's past, probably in the last year, something has peed there.

Alie: That's a very good point. Even tiny little invertebrates, they're makin' pee all the time! And they're doing it on our romaine lettuce that we're buying from the store. Everything's peeing on everything. There are things *in* us right now peeing on each other.

Alexis: Exactly. [*singing*] It's the ciiiiircle of pee! [*laughs*]

And that's my thing that I always love reminding people, that the farms that we get our groceries from do not exist in a microcosm either. You don't know how many field mice peed on your kale. You should wash everything you take home, whether you pulled it out of the ground yourself or if someone else did.

Alie: Very good point.

Alexis: I just try to help people put that out of their minds. Now of course, there are some areas that I avoid because they get peed on more often than others, and that is what I call "The Dog Pee Zone," which I would say is, like, a solid foot, foot-and-a-half into anyone's lawn that is on a sidewalk. [*"Out of bounds."*]

Alie: Yes!

Alexis: It's probably best to just leave that be.

Alie: I bet there's someone out there, a foraging ecologist getting their PhD on, like, the concentration of urea within certain feet of a sidewalk. There's gotta be.

Alexis: There has to be, and if there's not, that's as good of a reason to go back to school as I personally need. [*laughs*]

Alie: I know my tiny dog, she's got the perimeter of lawns absolutely covered.

That's a huge weight off my mind. I love foraging. I've always thought it's so fascinating. And one thing I'm so curious about, what is something that you tasted that you weren't sure if you were going to dig it at all and it was just delightful?

Alexis: Ooh, that's a fun one. I would say cow parsnips. They are in the carrot family, which is famous for having some of, like, the best wild edibles, but also famous for having some very deadly lookalikes to those same wild edibles. I've been eating Queen Anne's lace for a really long time. I think I figured out that Queen Anne's lace was wild carrots, *Daucus carota*, when I was in high school, and it blew my mind because where my family stays in Massachusetts, there's Queen Anne's lace everywhere. And I'm like, "You mean I could've been just digging this up the entire time?!"

Cow parsnip is also in the Apiaceae family. It's also called pushki.

Aside: These plants are not another internet acronym. Apiaceae [phonetic: A-P-A-C-A] is a full word, it's just a long Latin one for a family of flowering plants. What are some other Apiaceae plants? Celery, carrot, parsley, dill, cumin, anise. So many Apiaceae plants have already made it into your mouth area, but some of them are in the not-to-be-messed-with category because they are straight-up poison, like hemlock, or are highly phytophototoxic, which means 'plant and light makes bad.' Think skin blisters that require medical attention, and a lot of well-justified moaning, and pouting. But cow parsnip is safe; however, it doesn't always look like it.

Alexis: A lot of Indigenous peoples ate it, and still eat it, for millennia. But its dangerous lookalike is giant hogweed, which has been in the news off and on in certain areas of the country because it's super invasive and it's *super* dangerous. Third-degree burns if you interact with the sap while the sun is out dangerous. We love a phytotoxin.

Alie: I mean, you gotta give it to the plants. They figured it out.

Alexis: You do, and everyone gets really mad at them and I'm just like, "Listen, if it makes you feel any better, don't take it personally, because we're not who they did that for. The insects are."

Alie: *[laughs]* "It's not for you."

Alexis: They're not out to get us. They're out to get the small crunchy bois. Don't take it personally if you get burned. Cow parsnips, giant hogweed: leaf shapes are super similar. The difference is cow parsnips get to be, like, eh... six feet. Maybe even like seven or eight feet tall, max. Whereas giant hogweed can end up being, like, a 16-foot tower of doom.

Alie: Oh my god! They don't call it giant for nothing.

Alexis: I believe the species name is, like, mega-gigantium. It's, I believe, a derivative of the Latin word for humongous, and it makes sense. Cow parsnip was one of those that I'd heard so many good things about it, but it's really hard, even when you are so confident in your ability to ID plants, to get over the hump of the .001% chance of mortal danger.

Alie: Yeah! Is there an identification trick for some of the more dangerous plants? Like, between giant hogweed and wild carrots, is there something you can look for? Like a purplish ring at the top, or something discerning like that?

Alexis: I'm glad you called out purple because I love how often purple is the color of danger in nature. When it comes to differentiating Queen Anne's lace and poison hemlock, purple is actually one of the identifiers, so purple splotches that you will see on poison hemlock but you will not see on Queen Anne's lace, wild carrots.

For cow parsnips versus giant hogweed, cow parsnips have this very fine kind of fuzz all over them and these really cute papery sheets over their leaves before the leaves go ahead and shoot out. Also, their leaves are very even in their serration. Whereas giant hogweed's leaves, similar shape, irregular serration, which I feel like makes sense. Chaos means bad. Organized means good. And there are a couple other tells too, like the hollowness of the stem on cow parsnips. But the moral of the story is, I babysat a stand of cow parsnips for a full calendar year to watch it go through its entire life cycle before I finally ate some last year.

Alie: Oh my gosh. That is an investment of time. Did it pay off?

Alexis: It did! Oh my gosh, absolutely delicious. The fried flower buds, right before the flowers open especially, are just a taste to behold. Behold is for sight. Still a taste to behold. And the leaves are beautiful and aromatic this time of year, a little bit reminiscent of celery, which makes sense; another Apiaceae family member. Also a little reminiscent of, like, coriander and a little bit of burnt orangeness, which becomes much more prominent in their seeds later on in the season. So, absolutely worth it. I just made a flatbread with some cow parsnip leaves diced into the dough just yesterday. A+.

Alie: A+? Nice!

Alexis: 10/10, would recommend to a friend. My caveat is, if you are going to harvest it, I don't know, maybe babysit it for a year to make sure that you're not going to get a burn and be very sad. And also, only harvest from healthy stands of it. The stand that I harvest from has doubled in size year over year, two years in a row. That's the only reason why I feel comfy harvesting from it.

Alie: Ah! Do you ever take people with you and give up your spots? How protective of certain plants are foragers?

Alexis: Oh my gosh, it really does depend on the plant. There's a handful of people who I've taken to some of my, like, "secret spots," some of my "this time of year there's ramps and cutleaved toothwort as far as the eye can see" kind of spots.

Aside: What are ramps? Despite sounding like a disease that you get from a dirty hot tub, ramps are just an oniony, leeky type of scallion, oniony type of plant, only they're free if you find them, and also trendy. And cutleaved toothwort, which sounds like another affliction, it's a wasabi horseradishy-tasting plant that has ganja-looking leaves and little pinkish flowers.

Also, did you know that 'wort' means root? So, toothwort plants have roots that look like discarded teeth. Never let anyone tell you that science isn't goth.

Alexis: I'm not crazy possessive over any of the spaces because none of them belong to me. [laughs] And it's just... it's not worth getting all riled up about because someday someone's going to find out about it. The only experience I've had with something that I tried to keep secret and the beans got spilled, but not by me, is the persimmon tree near my house.

A sweet, curious soul, using iNaturalist, last summer, probably looked up and said, "Oh my god, this tree is full of these adorable, cute little green fruits. I'm going to figure out what it is." iNaturalist, being the great app that it is, immediately was like, "Ooh! [talking fancy] *Diospyros virginiana*. Congratulations, friend. You've found a persimmon tree." So they tagged it, and now I am *not* the only person who visits that tree during the fall and winter. And that's okay.

Alie: Do you ever see anyone else rolling up with a basket? Are you like, "Oh hello. Hello."?

Alexis: Ooh, I've just missed people before. I've seen people, like, taking their plastic bag and hopping into their car and driving away right as I'm walking up with my bag. And I'm just like, "Oh no! Friend! Come back!"

Aside: So foragers: Make friends. Just respect the supply and no one will have to grapple, sweat-soaked on a lawn for a handful of persimmons. So the first rule of forager club is *not* don't talk about forager club.

Alie: Let's say that you're a baby forager, and you're just starting, you're inspired by someone with amazing energy and knowledge on TikTok, and you decide, "I'm going to start eating my neighborhood." Where do you think is a good place to start? Are dandelions an entry level? What've we got?

Alexis: Ooh, I would say dandelions are an excellent entry-level edible, not just because they are almost universally recognizable, but because every single part of the plant is useful. You can eat the flowers; you can pickle the flower stems. You can eat the greens. You can ferment the greens, making like a sauerkraut with dandelion. Yum yum yum. Very tasty. The taproot, you can go ahead and eat it like a root veggie, though it's a little bit bitter. So a lot of people will roast it and grind it into a coffee substitute, or dice it, roast it, and then throw it into some alcohol to macerate to make bitters. [singsong] The whole plant is useful.

So I feel like that's a great gateway plant because if you have fun with that, odds are you will have fun with more of them. In terms of other really easily recognizable ones, and I think this accidentally ended up being a gateway foraging plant for a lot of folks, are

magnolias. So many of us have magnolias planted as ornamentals in our neighborhoods. They're one of those plants that, for whatever reason, a lot of us know the names of. And those white and pink flowers, if we're talking about, like, saucer magnolias, are so recognizable, so hard to confuse with anything else. Because I mean, magnolias as a genus are very unique flowers. That's what happens when you decide to push pause on evolution a couple million years ago. That's fine. It's casual.

So that one's been a really great one too, and to see so many people going out, and gathering them, and making magnolia syrups, and making magnolia snap cookies, was so exciting.

[clip of Alexis on TikTok: "We all know that magnolias smell amazing, but did you know that their petals kind of taste like ginger? So we're going to do a play on a ginga' snap cookie. It's a magnolia snap cookie. Flow-er coo-kie! Flow-er coo-kie!"]

Aside: Also, if you're not on TikTok, don't freak out. Don't worry about it. Check out @BlackForager on YouTube, where Alexis has posted a ton of her recipes, including one for magnolia cookies uploaded about a month or two ago. And I was just over on this video's page to grab that soundbite, and then I read the description and I had to include this. In the description, Alexis writes:

I am super proud of these cookies! And not just because they passed the taste test with my partner's family, but because a year ago I don't think I would've felt confident creating a cookie recipe on my own.

And as I found myself sitting on the couch this afternoon smelling like nothing but magnolia flowers and warm sugar, I realized I am quite happy with who I am right now.

But yes, her TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube all have great recipes and the same handle, @BlackForager, and she has recipes including ones for dandelions and magnolias. Easy gateway foraging plants.

Alexis: So those would be my two recommendations off the top of my head. If you are in the Midwest or along the East Coast like I am, papaws are another great one, *Asimina triloba*, but it is not papaw season yet.

Alie: What is a papaw?

Alexis: Ooh! So, papaws are the largest native fruit to North America, if you're not counting squash. Squash are really cool too.

Aside: Okay, but back to papaws, which look like if green potatoes grew on trees. Mm! But what do they taste like?

Alexis: They taste as if a mango and a banana had a baby, if you get a good one. I'm going to give that caveat, because last week a friend of mine pulled me aside and said, "I don't know if I did something wrong, but I tried a papaw last year and I didn't like it." And papaws are a great adventure. They don't breed true. It's very hard to assume how a papaw from a certain tree is going to taste until you're tasting it. But when you find good ones, oh buddy, they are fantastic. And they do look like little mangoes hanging out in the trees. The trees have these humongous, glossy dark green leaves that make them very easy to recognize from a distance. Once you've seen one, you start seeing them everywhere if you live in a region that they're native to.

And they are a fruit that did not develop for us. They developed for megafauna. They developed for giant sloths to eat the fruits whole and poop out the seeds. But now we get to enjoy them, which is cool.

Alie: That actually brings up the point of native and invasive species. Are we doing the Earth a mitzvah by eating invasive species? And how do you find out in your region what's gotta go and what's gotta flourish?

Alexis: Oh, I absolutely think we're doing mother nature a solid by eating invasives because eating them is much better for the environment than spraying them, which is what I see a lot of cities, towns, and municipalities turning to when it comes to eradication of certain species.

Two that come to mind for all of us kicking it on the eastern half of the United States are garlic mustard, which is very much in season in, oh gosh, pretty much early through late spring. Here in Ohio, right now, while we are recording this, it is flowering. So I'm just going through and picking the flowerheads off of all of them that I see and bringing them home to have them for dinner, but mostly just because I don't want them to set seed because they are *very* prolific spreaders. They are a non-native brassica. And brassicas are just so good at their job, and their job is being spicy and spreading seeds.

Aside: And what is a brassica, you ask? That's why I'm here. Brassica are things such as broccoli, and cabbage, and kale, and rutabaga, and kohlrabi, and brussels sprouts, and mustards. And the oil of the brassica seeds is where Canola oil comes from! There's no such thing as a canola! The word just means Canadian Oil Low Acid, because it was invented in Canada!

[to Jarrett:] Jarrett, did you like when I told you all about that earlier?

Jarrett: I loved it! I love learning about Canadian Oil Low Acid!

Alie: [laughs] There's no such thing as a canola!

Okay, but back to yellow mustard flowers, which bloom in early springtime in California, and everyone gets so hyped up about nature not knowing that it's wildly invasive and may have been introduced by Spanish missionaries tossing it out like confetti on their path up the California coast. Mustard.

Alie: It's so good for Instagram pictures, but native plant enthusiasts haaaaayte it! Hayte it!

Alexis: Yaaaah! Oh my gosh, if you are in California, go find all of the mustard, pull it up, eat it! Blanch it, put it in pesto, put it in a stew, pickle the stems. Eat all of it.

Alie: Get rid of it! Eat it!

Alexis: Please! And I know, here we also have Japanese knotweed, which is a *prolific* spreader and it is kind of becoming a scourge in a lot of areas in the northeast. You'll just see towns just spray the worst kind of chemicals onto them because it's a very hardy species. It's very good at the game of survival, so you've kind of got to drown it in a lot of things that are not good for the rest of the environment if you want to get rid of them. But what a joy it would be if instead, you know, in the spring when they start putting all of their chunky little shoots up, people were just going through cutting them off or pulling them up and collecting them for people to eat.

Aside: Eat that knotweed, Northeast United States, and actually every state except North Dakota, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Florida, and Hawaii, who aren't yet overrun with it.

If you're like, "What is the knotweed?" Okay, so it's been in the US since the 1860s when it was given to a nursery owner in New York, and now it's everywhere. Japanese knotweed. Its root systems can span 70 feet. It grows up to one-and-a-half stories tall. Eight inches a day! And it has these large green leaves and a bunch of little white flowers, and the stems look a little like bamboo, which is why it's called American bamboo. It's not bamboo.

And in spring, sprouts look like reddish asparagus and it has a sour flavor, or kind of lemony like rhubarb, which is where it got the nickname 'donkey rhubarb'. Now, if you want to name your EDM EP *Donkey Rhubarb*, think again, people. British electronica outfit Aphex Twin already beat you to it. Why? Why does Aphex Twin care about donkey rhubarb? Because in England, if you have this invasive knotweed on your property, banks might refuse to give you a mortgage because it's so robust and so hard to eradicate, and it ruins foundations of buildings.

In prepping for the 2012 Olympics, London spent the equivalent of \$100 million to get rid of Japanese knotweed on 10 acres. \$100 million! That's \$10 million an acre. Connecticut weed scientist Jatinder Aulakh has said, ominously, "There is no insect, pest, or disease in the United States that can keep it in check."

So what do you do? One, make sure it hasn't been doused in herbicides, and two, eat it. It grows through the cracks in Alexis's deck.

Alexis: Because for a species that is very quickly changing the landscape on the outskirts of a lot of cities, it is *delicious*. It's very rhubarb-esque, but slightly more vegetal than rhubarb. That being said, it does lend itself both sweet and savory so well. I made sorbet with it last year that I was obsessed with. I need to make it again this year. For a class over the weekend, I did a fun little sautéed grains and threw a couple of the shoots in, and they just add a lot of lemony brightness to any dish.

And when the shoots are young and you cook them just right, they get kind of, like, melt-in-your-mouth when you cook them. For my friends who do eat the eggs, I hear that they're a wonderful addition to an omelet. They're delicious, and what a joy it would be if we just suddenly had cities with armfuls, *truckfuls*, of free, lemony, Japanese knotweed shoots this time of year instead of just going and dousing them in herbicides.

Alie: On the topic of herbicides, that's something I didn't even think of, but when you're foraging, is that something you have to be more careful of than pee? And how do you do that?

Alexis: Oh yeah. I'm way more worried about herbicides than I'm worried about pee. There are a couple things that I tell people to look out for when they're foraging in urban spaces. I think some people don't realize how visually apparent it is when an area has been treated recently with herbicides. You will see, like, rings of discoloration around the very obviously sprayed weeds. So if you're looking at someone's lawn and it is otherwise... like, it's 98%, 99% beautiful grass throughout the rest of the lawn, and you look around the fringes, and you see some weeds doing their thing because they're hardy AF and stubborn AF, you should probably stay away from those because the way that people get perfectly manicured monoculture lawns is help from herbicides.

So, those guys I typically leave alone. If you see any odd discoloration either on the plant or in a, like, little perimeter ring around the plant, leave it alone. Absolutely. Any irregular wilting that you wouldn't expect to see this time of year, absolutely leave it alone. And just for the sake of things like runoff and whatnot too, and exhaust, I give a pretty wide margin to streets that are wider than two lanes and an even wider margin to railroads.

Alie: Oh really? Because of diesel engines?

Alexis: Yeah.

Alie: Ooh... I wasn't sure if it was that or just the, you know, getting lost in a playlist, headphones on, and just... choo-choo! You know?

Alexis: [laughs]

Alie: Yikes.

Alexis: "And that's how we lost the forager. Wow." [laughs]

Alie: So sad!

When it comes to where you forage, how do you do it differently in the city versus if you're out on a hike? And what kinds of stuff do you find in each place?

Alexis: Yeah, so in the city it's going to be a lot more of the kind of classic, quintessential weeds; the plants that like taking advantage of disturbed ground where they don't have to, you know, outcompete any of our other native species. So right now in the cities I'm seeing a lot of Queen Anne's lace already putting up their new sets of leaves for the year. A ton of dandelions, a lot of clover; white clover, red clover, and now sweet clover is starting to show up to hang out. A ton of mugwort. I passed a couple of very healthy stands of mugwort while I was on a walk around the neighborhood today that I *will* be visiting this weekend because I'm in the mood for mugwort roasted potatoes.

Aside: So what does mugwort look like? Okay, I had to look it up. It's a member of the daisy family, so its leaves look like daisy leaves, and it has clusters of these drooped-bell buds at the tip of a stalk. And mugwort can grow meters and meters high. And while scientists call it *Artemisia vulgaris*, close friends call it riverside wormwood, felon herb, old Uncle Henry, and naughty man. And I feel like I have to buy mugwort a beer to hear how it got those nicknames.

But mugwort just means 'marsh root', and it's best to pick the leaves and buds between July to September, and you can season some meat with it, you can make a mochi dessert, or look into its medicinal purposes. Indigenous people in North America used mugwort for a wide variety of ills, like pit stank, to colds and flus, rousing folks from comas, and even inducing labor. So, ethnopharmacology episode, anyone? Yes.

But yes, when this was recorded a few weeks ago, Alexis was planning to gather some mugwort and roast potatoes with it.

Alexis: A lot of the friends who you see enjoying spaces that maybe have been modified for something else. We have a couple of empty lots in our neighborhood in which the ground was turned over before the winter, and now that ground is just covered in weeds. Whereas if I'm in the forest right now or out in the woods, oh gosh, it's almost a completely different biome. We're still in the middle of spring ephemerals season, so I'm seeing trout lilies, trilliums, ramps, cutleaved toothwort, Virginia bluebells.

I'm starting to see pheasant back mushrooms, oyster mushrooms, morels of course. And then you have a lot of the trees whose early leaves are edible starting to leaf out, like maples. You have pines, spruces, and firs putting out their new growth and their needles are very soft right now and great to incorporate into meals too.

So, it's a fun game having a change in the mindset of what you're looking for depending on where you are. And I'm lucky that where I live here in Ohio, while I very much live in the city, Columbus proper, I do not have to go very far to not feel like I'm in the city anymore.

Alie: By the way, congratulations on your mushroom find.

Alexis: Thank you!

Alie: Pretty big deal.

Alexis: Oh my gosh. I know. I feel like morels are just, like, a badge of honor in the foraging community. I feel like I haven't been an official forager until now.

Alie: I saw that. There are so many questions from patrons and so many of them start off, "Congratulations on the morel!" Like, so many. *[laughs]*

Alexis: Ah! That's nice!

Alie: People are so thrilled for you. I was wondering, what percent of your diet do you think is foraged versus market?

Alexis: Ooh. I love this question because it varies a lot throughout the year, and we just finished the time of year where it's like maybe 10% or 15%, in the winter through early spring. And now I think we're kicking it up probably closer to around 25% just because there's not a whole lot of the high-caloric-value, high-nutrition-value plants out to play.

But oh my gosh, once we get to late summer and into the fall where it's like: Acorn season! Papaw season! Hazelnut season! Persimmon season! That's the time of year where I can have entire days where everything that I'm cooking with the exception of maybe a little bit of flour being thrown in, or an olive oil being added into a pan, is something that I foraged. So, it very much fluctuates as we progress through the year.

Alie: I have so many questions from listeners. I have 35 pages of questions from listeners.

Alexis: WHAT?! Oh my gosh! *[laughs]*

Alie: Yeah. 35 pages of questions. Single spaced! A lot of questions. So many people who just love you, I mean... I should just forward you all these questions just so if you're ever having any kind of bad day, oh wow, people love you so much! Can I ask you some of their questions?

Alexis: Oh my gosh, yes! Do we have time to go through all of them?

Alie: I wish we did!

Aside: 35 pages of questions! But before we start answering them, first we're going to take a pit stop to donate some money to a charity of the ologist's choosing, and this week Alexis chose Backyard Basecamp, which aims to inspire Black, Indigenous, and all people of color across Baltimore city to find nature where they are and empowers them to explore further.

Backyard Basecamp also offers garden consultations, educator training, habitat discovery programs, and more. They are awesome. We've donated to them a few times in the past, so check them out and consider donating too. That is BackyardBasecamp.org. That donation was made possible by sponsors of the show who you may hear about now.

[Ad Break]

Okay, let's rifle through a basket of your questions and then feast on her answers.

Alie: Okay, two great questions I really loved. One from Lynn Hodnett, who says: It seems to me that it's important to keep in mind that there are respectful ways to forage, or at least there should be. Are there guidelines for this and do these guidelines draw knowledge or inspiration from the Indigenous people of the region you're foraging? Lynn also says: I feel like Native people are routinely harassed for performing traditional actions like foraging while white people get away with taking more than they need.

And Sikwani Dana says that she: Learned about plants and their medicinal values, among other things, from my parents – she and her dad are Penobscot – and that knowledge has been passed down. But she is wondering how you gain the knowledge to know you're not going to poison yourself because she trusts learning from elders more than books. She would rather learn in the field hands-on.

So yeah, any thoughts on what you've learned from Indigenous cultures in foraging?

Alexis: Oh my gosh, I mean, that's... The Indigenous peoples of the Americas, that's the crux of everything that foraging is here right now. Their knowledge is the foundation of the knowledge that everyone else has had the opportunity to interact with and build upon.

I know... Michael Twitty talked about this a little bit in this book *The Cooking Gene* because a lot of enslaved Black folks in the South foraged, but obviously, the people who they got that information and that knowledge from were the Indigenous people. So, coming from my dad's side of the family, my dad's mom hails from the Seneca up in the New York area. But she passed away when my dad was in high school so he got, like, bits and pieces, and little, like, inklings about certain plants and certain foods, but not in the way that he wished he had.

And honestly, he also knew a whole lot about plants. I'm very lucky that as a person of color, both of my parents are very outdoorsy. Also, he got a lot from his dad's side of the family down in Mississippi from bits of information that they had been passing through the generations since they had been enslaved there.

So yeah, of course. I feel like, in some way or another, every single one of us who's talking about foraging in North America is only doing so because of the generosity with knowledge of the Indigenous people, who now, yeah, do not get to continue some of those practices and some of that land stewardship that is the whole reason why this nation looked the way that it did. Period.

I honestly feel like we need more Indigenous voices front and center when it comes to foraging here in the United States. As well, I like to think that I know a whole lot about foraging in a way that preserves for not just me next year but me in ten years and children in 20 years, and their children in 50 years, 60 years. I know that I don't know everything.

Aside: Alexis notes that we could do an entire series of episodes on the role of Indigenous land stewardship before colonization. And this field does have an ology: Environmental Anthropology. Further proof that I will make this podcast until I die because there are so many good ologies. So please just get used to me, friends.

Speaking of friends, first-time question-asker Alexandra Holland wrote in to say: I love Alexis so much, I'm going to die of excitement. And Alexandra wants to know: How do you use foraging to connect to other people and to yourself? And Konstantin Gutnichenko asks: Are there any clubs that I can join?

So yes, do foragers hang out together? How does one get invited to those gathering gatherings?

Alexis: Oh absolutely. We have a whole little community. I love it. I love it so much. We have Facebook groups divided by region, and divided by country, and divided by continent, and just global foraging groups too that really let us bond with one another past all of our borders. So it's great. You get to know the people very closely who are near to you.

I'm in a Midwest foraging group, I'm in an Ohio foraging group, I'm in a Central Ohio foraging group. So we definitely have a community, and we exchange recipes, and we exchange ideas, and we build each other up, and we buy each other's books. It's really nice. I'm so thankful that the internet makes it possible to digitally get to know all of these people and spend time with them. Especially in the age of covid, because it's not like any of us were able to go out and actually see each other in person.

Alie: Such an interesting thing about the last year for you is, you know, when so many people felt so isolated they gained a new appreciation for being outside, and then also had, like, a really cool new friend to show them, you know? So great.

We have so many questions that use the word newbie...

Aside: By the by: So many people, literally almost 50 folks asked this question, so I'm just going to shout out for this one the first-time question-askers, including Katelyn James, Alex Nelson, Curtis Roderick, Dane Schuckman, Katie Kyle, and...

Alie: Bennett Gerber wants to know: What are some go-to foraging tips? The Mushy asks: What are your favorite tools for different kinds of foraging?

So just one huge question: How do you start?

Alexis: [laughs] My "The Black Forager Guide to Getting Started Foraging" is three-fold. Number one is, get a foraging guide that is as specific as you can find for your area. For some places, that's just going to be a regional foraging guide like the book *Midwest Foraging*. For some places, like where some of my family lives in Massachusetts on Martha's Vineyard, there is literally *Edible Wild Plants of Martha's Vineyard* that their conservation society puts together each year. So, find a guide as hyper-specific as you can find, number one.

Number two is to join a regional foraging group on Reddit, or on Facebook, wherever you find groups of people hanging out digitally, because one, it will introduce you to people who are like-minded but maybe have a bit more experience than you. And two, what a perfect way to see what is in season, because you know, 10, 15 times a day, other people are posting what they're seeing and they don't live too far away from you.

Aside: So get a book, join a group, and then what's the last step?

Alexis: And then three: make friends with one of the folks in that group and go out with them, because you can't replicate seeing the plants in real time in all three dimensions. For me, that's where the real learning comes, and that's where the real memorization comes from, just for me personally. I can see a plant or a mushroom in a book until the cows come home, and the way that it'll stick in my mind and the way that I will be able to point from across a field and be like, "Look! It's yellow rocket!" is being able to see it in person for the first time and get a good gander at it. So, hit the trails with someone who's been at it for a bit longer than you. There is no replacement for it.

Alie: Also, I guess you can't smell a book, can you? But smell must come into it, right?

Alexis: You can't, so when people are like, "Pheasant back mushrooms, they smell like cucumbers," well, yeah. There's no scratch-and-sniff that I know of, at least, in the foraging books. Yet. I don't know, that could be a million-dollar idea for somebody out there. Scratch-and-sniff foraging book. I'd buy it.

Aside: Okay, I looked it up and I found one title, *The Scratch & Sniff Book of Weeds*, but alas, on second glance, it just said *Weed*. Not weeds. So, the *Scratch and Sniff book of Weed*. The blurb on the front boasts: This book is dope!

Also, I looked up, when is a plant a weed? And essentially, a weed is just any plant that is unwanted in a human-controlled setting. So weed, as a name for marijuana, perhaps as ironic as they come, because for the most part it seems pretty wanted.

PS: Is weed, and reefer, and trees, and laughing grass, cabbage, that smoochy-woochie-poochie, is that even native to North America? Nope. It originated in central Asia before making its way to Africa, and then the Caribbean, and South America. And then after prohibition ended, the agency that became the DEA was like, "Quick! What should we ban next?" And they turned their attention to this smokable plant that humans have used for eons. That sticky-icky skunkweed. Which brings us back to smells.

[Jarrett in the background: "The devil's lettuce!"]

Alie: But that must be good to know when you're out foraging that you're using a lot of your senses at once too.

Alexis: Yeah, and that's one thing... I think so many people get very worried about lookalikes, which you should. That little layer of anxiety is something that keeps you safe. But I can't even fully communicate how you are truly using all of your senses for IDing. Yes, I made a video on how to tell the difference between Queen Anne's lace and poison hemlock when they are still wee babes, just little rosettes, when honestly *the best* way to tell the difference is that poison hemlock smells like rat pee and Queen Anne's lace doesn't. [laughs] Poison hemlock does not smell like something you want to put in your face, and for good reason.

Alie: If you don't like rat pee.

Alexis: If you don't like rat pee. If you *do* like rat pee, I don't know what to tell you.

Aside: But what if something smells like fungus genitals and you like it and want to put it in your mouth? Well, all mushrooms share that characteristic. Maybe not of you wanting to put it in your mouth, but they're all fungus genitals. And so many patrons, including Ned Lansing, Dorit, Brenna Anderson, Eden Sunshine, morel hunters Madeline Duke and Curtis Roderick, Rebekah Weinzetl, Hayley Everson, Rachel Stearns, Kate Bell, Madelyn Winter, new listener Nicholas, Maritime Archaeologist Chanelle Zap, Christi Kazakov, Sébastien Papineau, Anya Marion, RJ Doidge, Catherine Jameson, Annie C, and Zoe Hull all asked about this. In ThimbleWhim's words: I love foraging for garlic grass, fiddleheads, and dandelions. I never forage for mushrooms because I don't know enough and I'm way too addicted to not dying. And Rachel Casha wrote in: All mushrooms are edible. Some mushrooms are only edible once. Where do you even start learning proper identification?

Alie: I have a lot of questions about mushrooms, because... Okay, set me straight here. I feel like mushrooms is... like, you level up to mushrooms. Is that correct?

Alexis: So, I feel like you level up to mushrooms because I grew up being very plant specific in my study of what's growing around me. So I think it kind of depends on what you feel more comfortable learning first. For me, I guess I just... I've been learning about plants for long

enough and interacting with them for long enough that I can go into a new space in a region that I'm somewhat familiar with and be like, "I have a good idea of what I'm going to find here, flora-wise." *Do not* ask me what I think I'm going to find fungi-wise because I will *not* have a good answer for you. *[laughs]* Every time I find a mushroom it is a pleasant surprise.

Alie: Yeah! Someone, about your morels, asked... Zoe Hull says: Oh my goodness, I love Alexis so much. Yay! She just found her first morel, so I've got to know what is the secret to this elusive, cerebral delight?

Alexis: So, unfortunately, the only secret that I know that seems to be worth its salt is the one that I did have in that video, and it's that if you are in an area that is known for having morel mushrooms and the ground temperature has been consistently between, like, 40-60° and it has rained within the last week, look for trees that are dead and have bark starting to peel off of them.

The cool thing about morels is they begin their life in between the cells of those trees, and then when those trees die, that is when morels then, kind of, convert to breaking down that dead matter and put up those fruiting bodies. So, you're going to be finding them near dead trees, but not trees that have been dead for a very long time, just because they would then be devoid of the nutrients that the morels need to grow and to fruit. And honestly, I've had the knowledge up in my noggin for a while and I still only found my first morel last week.

Alie: That's so exciting. How did you cook it?

Alexis: I brought four home, and everyone was just... Because I've only had them dried before, which are still delightful, but there's something about, like, not having to reconstitute them that everybody says is just miraculous. So, I went super simple. I melted a little bit of vegan butter, I added in a splash of white wine, and I added in a little bit of diced field garlic, some *Allium vineale*, just to get some aromatics going. And then I halved the morels and tossed them in the sauce, cooked them until the wine had cooked off and had caramelized them just a wee bit, and then just ate them that way. And Alie, they were so good I cried a little.

Alie: Oh my gosh! That's so exciting. Is this the season for it, or are they a seasonal mushie?

Alexis: They are a seasonal mushie. Here on the eastern side of the United States, we are, like, right in the middle of morel season right now. In the Midwest specifically, things are a little up in the air right now. We've had some very chaotic weather. It has been both 80° and we've had an inch of snow, all within the last seven days.

Alie: Oh wow...

Alexis: So we have no idea if that means good things for the rest of morel season or if it means bad things for the rest of morel season. But on the West Coast, where you also have things like burn morels, those are going to be dependent on wildfires, whether or not you're going to be able to find them. And morel season is much more, like, late winter.

[clip from Alexis's TikTok, singsong: "Morel mushrooms, they're kind of creepy but at least they taste good."]

Alie: Kendra St. Clair wants to know if you write your songs ahead of time or if they are musical improv?

Alexis: Oh my gosh, what a great question. It is a little bit of both. If I'm just riffing in a video, that is almost always just musical improv. I was in an improv group called Affirmative Distraction here in Columbus for a couple of years. *[laughs]*

Alie: Amazing!

Alexis: An all-Black improv group here in the city, and I love musical improv. It used to scare the crap out of me and now it's one of my fun little side hobbies. It's something that I really enjoy doing. But things that involve instruments, absolutely written ahead of time. I am not one of those people who can just pick up an instrument and be like, "And now, here's a song fresh out of my brainhole." I mean, I *can* do that, it just won't be good.

Alie: Understood. Great question from Catherine Jameson. They want to know: Why are so many foraged plants so mucilaginous?

Alexis: *[laughs]* I think the answer is, a lot of plants are mucilaginous and we just don't cultivate a lot of them, so then when it's time to go out and forage things, you just get constantly surprised by the plants and the fungi that do a slimy when you cook with them.

Alie: *[laughs]* Do a slimy. Well you know, you compared it to okra as a, kind of, thickening agent, right?

Alexis: Yes, and that's exactly what I was going to mention. I was going to say, for folks who grew up eating okra, that is not a crazy surprising thing. But for people who didn't, giving them something made with, like, mallow for the first time might be a bit of a squicky experience for them if they're not prepared.

Alie: It's just a little slippery! Just a li'l bit.

Alexis: Just a li'l slippery. It's good for ya!

Aside: And from slime to something more serious, a lot of patrons had cultural questions about foraging, like Riley McInnis, Emily Richardson, and Claudia Dana, and first-time question-asker Vikki Preston, who wrote in to say: I'm an Indigenous person living in my rural homelands, and for us, foraging or gathering is still a common a necessary practice, much as it's always been. But Vikki wanted to know, alongside listeners Alexis Jarvis and Amani Al-Kidwa:

Alie: How and why can it be empowering as a Black, Indigenous, or person of color forager?

Alexis: My Instagram handle is @BlackForager, and that was 100% on purpose, because one, I didn't see a lot of people who looked like me in this space, and I *still* don't see a lot of people who look like me in the space. I honestly think of it kind of like an act of restorative justice to be a person of color who is foraging because historically, culturally, and legally, a lot of barriers were put in place to prohibit us, historically, from being able to do so.

I talk about it a little bit in a video that I'd made for Black History Month, but in the South, immediately after the Civil War, a lot of laws were put in place to purposefully curb recently freed Black folks from being able to forage and trap to provide for themselves, essentially holding them in economic bondage to the plantations. So, they weren't enslaved anymore but now they pretty much have to be sharecroppers because there's not much else you can do.

Trespass went from being a civil offense to being a criminal offense, which suddenly makes it a way more expensive problem for you if you are on somebody else's land and they don't want you to be there. But also, if you're recently freed, you don't have land of your own to be foraging on, to be growing things on, to be trapping on, to be hunting on. And, both physically in some places but mostly metaphorically, fences were put up around public property, and in a lot of spaces it became illegal to forage and trap there too.

A lot of that also has some history in the very beginnings of the National Park movement in the late 1800s, the 1880s and the 1890s, when a lot of white men wanted to preserve the pristine conditions of the green spaces they saw around them while completely ignoring the fact that the way that those green spaces became the way that they were was because of a lot of these symbiotic relationships between the people who were living off of them and the land itself.

So, when a lot of laws are put in place to purposefully disenfranchise people from being able to do something, it usually has a lot of generational and cultural spillover. There's a pretty big cultural barrier to hop over to be a person of color, even just existing in the outdoors, when a lot of us had grandparents, or even in my case, parents, who grew up in a time where there was, like, a very real fear of being a Black person, in the case of my family, by yourself, out in the middle of the woods. That wasn't a situation that you would ever want to find yourself in for fear of, like, extreme acts of violence.

So for me to be a Black woman foraging, yeah, it feels like justice to me. It's an act that I feel like we should begin reclaiming. We have just as much of a right to do it as anybody else, but because we have all of these historical and external factors working against us, there's just not a lot of us out here. Thankfully, I do see that beginning to change and I hope to see it change even more rapidly as we move forward.

Aside: Alexis notes that if your great grandparents aren't foraging, well, they're not going to teach your grandparents how to forage, and they aren't going to teach your parents, who aren't going to teach you. And not to mention so, so much oral tradition and teaching has been lost over the years. And I think one of the things that's so powerful about Alexis's lessons are that she has been captivated by foraging since she was five, and has been studying it for years, and years, and years, and part of her work feels like carrying on a certain oral tradition of her own; telling stories, showing us exactly what to look for, how to prepare it, in a manner that has been missing through generations of trauma.

And her work is igniting a new interest in folks who have been kept from this knowledge and resources. Gathered around the glow of our phones, folks listen intently to her lessons.

Alie: I think it's so great that you're bringing so many people together who feel similarly.

Actually, we have one question... Jessica Duncan says: first-time question-asker and fellow Black girl who loves plants here. From the Pacific Northwest. I'm interested in getting into foraging for mushies; however, I'm also concerned about trail erosion and the negative effects of trampling through forests. Do you have any tips on how to ethically and sustainably forage?

Alexis: Yes. Well, since she said that she is specifically interested in mushroom collecting, I would say, if you have, like, a little pocketknife and you go ahead and just cut off the fruiting bodies instead of, you know, disrupting the mycelium that are doing their thing... A lot of foraging is, honestly, evaluating space by space, where you are at any given time. If you are in a place that is having issues with erosion of soil, and you look around and you see signs of erosion of soil; you see a top layer with poor soil quality, the wind blows and you see a whole lot of nutritionally depleted topsoil blowing around, that's probably not an area that you want to be taking any biodiversity out of. You want to, kind of, give it as much of a chance to thrive as it could possibly have.

So a lot of it is just reading the space that you're in visually. Reading up on a space that you're going to be in ahead of time. And that doesn't just go for things like erosion. When

I'm on the East Coast, if I'm foraging seaweed, I'm checking the water quality. Those are levels that are usually posted for commercial fishermen, but anybody who is out there, you know, fishing, clamming, and in my case, dragging seaweed directly out of the ocean to put into their gullet, you also want to be knowing about the water temperature, algal blooms, any spills that have happened in the area. So, a little bit of it is just doing the research that you can if you are able for a space that you hope to be foraging from.

Alie: Are those the dead man's fingers?

Alexis: Yes. Oh my god, I love dead man's fingers so much. They're so creepy!

Alie: Dead man's fingers, a healthy bouquet of them.

Aside: So, we're not talking about the mushroom called dead man's fingers, which truly are a ghastly, grayish, fingery-looking sight on the forest floor. Rather, these dead man's fingers are also called green sea fingers, stag seaweed, green fleece, and oyster thief, also known as *Codium fragile*, if you're feeling specific.

Now, Alexis says that she tries to use the binomial nomenclature, or genus and species, format because so many foragable foods have tons of local names, and she says that if a thing is important enough to have different names in a bunch of different places, it's because it's really tasty or it's really, really gross. Or lethal.

Now, how do you make sure that you keep eating dead man's fingers without *having* dead man's fingers?

Alie: Hope says... and maybe this is some flimflam you can bust. Hope says: I've been told that you can test for berries being poisonous by rubbing them on your hand and seeing if it tingles or numbs. And then if it doesn't, doing the same with your cheek, and if nothing there either, you might be able to eat it. Is that true at all? Is it flimflam? Is it reliable?

Alexis: For a lot of us, especially who grew up being very outdoorsy, that was kind of the way that we were told to deal with a situation if we [*dramatically*] found ourselves stranded in the middle of the woods! The way I always heard it was, you know, you'd rub it on the inside of your ankle... You pretty much travel to more sensitive pieces of skin and wait a few hours to see if it reacts.

Because I am a cautious being, and because not every hazardous plant behaves the same way or possesses the same toxins, I'm just going to go ahead and say that unless you are dying, probably not the best rule of thumb to go by. And even if you are dying, probably not the best rule of thumb to go by.

Also, if you are looking for berries, I can say with confidence that if you are in North America, we don't have any poisonous compound berries. So if it looks like a raspberry, you're good to go.

Aside: Okay, so compound or aggregate berries include the dewberry, the blackberry, the raspberry, so that should help, Rebecca, Rachel Sortor, Mandii Smith, Donnielle O'Neill, and Megan Burnett Tarasiewicz.

On that topic, this is a very, very good question:

Alie: Emma Kiley is a first-time question-asker and their greatest love is for serviceberries. Is a serviceberry like a raspberry?

Alexis: [*gasp!*] Oh my god, serviceberries! I'm so glad someone brought serviceberries up because I always want to shoehorn them into the conversation, but I never know if people are going to know what I'm talking about.

So, serviceberries, which are the *Amelanchier* genus, there are a couple of different species that fall under it but we call them all serviceberries, or juneberries, or saskatoon berries. In southern Ohio sometimes they just call them sarvis or sarvisberries. They actually look a lot more like blueberries. They are crowned berries, so they have the little points sticking out of them, the little last signs of their flowers. They... Man, they might be my favorite. I love papaws, just from a purely ethnobotanical history standpoint, but serviceberries might be my favorite thing to forage. They taste like apples and blueberries mixed together.

Alie: Oh man! Can you make a cobbler... Can you get enough to make a cobbler out of them, or is it, like, if you get three of them you've had the best day of your life?

Alexis: Oh, no. So, last year, just from the sole tree closest to my house, I gathered enough berries, while still leaving all the ones that I couldn't reach, which was most of them, for the birds, I gathered enough to make, like, ten hand pies.

Alie: Aaah!

Alexis: Last year, for whatever reason, I gathered one big jar of serviceberries, and I was like, "You know what? I'm tired." And by the time I wasn't tired anymore, serviceberry season was over. So this year I'm going to stock up all of my energy and my strength and we're going to go ham on serviceberries. My neighborhood loves planting them as ornamentals, so they are everywhere!

Alie: Oh man! That's gotta be in, like, apartment listings. "What is around you that you could eat."

Alexis: I honestly think that people need to start listing it because if someone told me that a house that I was maybe going to move into has a serviceberry tree out front, I'd be like, "I'm done. Sold." You don't have a washer or a dryer but you have a serviceberry tree? Who cares? I'll wash my clothes in the sink. That's fine. It's better for the environment anyway.

Aside: Now, a certain film came up a few times, and Lina Zikas and Julia McDonald wanted to know how to avoid the same fate. Julia asked: Please tell us how to not Chris McCandless ourselves.

Does Alexis get this question a lot?

Alie: Are there any movies about foraging or survivalism that are inspiring to you or that you fucking hate, at all?

Alexis: Oh my gosh, people do bring up *Into the Wild* all the time. That's like everyone's literary experience with foraging. And I feel like for a lot of people their literary experience with foraging is, like, people being in mortal peril. It's always either *Into the Wild* or it's that frickin' scene in the *Hunger Games*, where it's like, "That's nightlock, Peeta! It'll kill you!" That's the way that everybody thinks about it.

I'm trying to think if I know of any movies in which the portrayal of foraging *doesn't* make me big sad...

Alie: Oh no!

Alexis: Oh no! None are coming to mind. Quick! Someone write a heartfelt children's film with foraging in it. You can consult me. I'll do it for free!

Alie: Yes! First, PBS show, and then consulting also, please.

Alexis: Yes, please.

Alie: Last questions I always ask: What sucks the most about either foraging or having a million people watching your foraging? What is one thing that you would change about it?

Alexis: Oh man... *[laughs]* I don't think there's anything that I would change about foraging. Processing what you bring home is sometimes tough. I feel like that's what I don't get as many questions about but I feel like I need to warn people about. If you're getting into foraging... Like, 80% of the fun is going out and finding the thing, but you do have to bring it home and do things with it, or... Either cook it immediately or do something, usually a little labor intensive, to it so you can preserve it for cooking with it in the future. I don't get to just bring the acorns home, and crack them open, and have a snack. Unfortunately. Acorns especially, that's a weeks-long process every fall.

But, that being said, I also find processing my finds to be very, like, meditative. It's like a great thing to do after a busy week. I'm a freak. I will process plants for two hours in complete silence in my kitchen and be just the happiest version of myself after.

Alie: I bet! Especially after you've had a... Each thing that you're processing has a narrative too. When you found it, how you decided to pick that one over the one next to it. There's so much context for every single leaf, you know?

Alexis: Exactly. There's so much to consider, and I find that taking the time to really pause and to really think about how thankful I am for everything that I brought home for each one of those plants, and for all of the people, places, and books where I've gotten my knowledge about that plant from. It fills my heart up, makes my heart feel all warm and fuzzy. And then at the end, you get a snack. Who doesn't like that?

So, since I would change nothing about foraging because foraging is amazing and wonderful, I will say that being a person who a lot of people are watching on the internet, nine times out of ten, super cool, very surreal experience. But a lot of people talk to you, or at least leave comments on your things, as if you are, like, not a real human person who then has to process what it is that they have said. And that stinks.

Additionally, being a woman and a woman of color in the space comes with a lot of added pressure to be so incredibly perfect. And I mean, yes, this is a line of study and a line of work in which you want to be perfect and you want to be accurate because you care about all of the people who follow you, and you want them to be safe, and you want them to feel like they are prepared knowledge-wise to go out and find something, or at least prepared to ask the right questions when they go and find more information about it. But being a person of color, I do find that I tend to incur skepticism a lot more than some of my delightful white peers.

Alie: God, that sucks.

Alexis: Yeah! It sucks. Thank you. It sucks.

Aside: Alexis recounted that online her knowledge gets doubted more than others even though she's been studying this for years. And it's impossible to ignore that sexism and racism. But it's also partly why she knows the work and being in this space is important. And also, she's just entertaining as hell.

Alie: I think what's so compelling about it is it's outdoorsy, and it's funny, and it's personable, and it's science, and it's food, and it's history! It's like a septuple whammy!

Alexis: Just a one-stop-shop for all different kinds of content.

Alie: It really is, and I just love the way that it gets people to notice their surroundings more and not take for granted all of the things that are growing around us.

Alexis: Yeah, I think a lot of people have found solace in nature, and a lot of folks who maybe wouldn't have otherwise. For me, my M.O. has always been: when you see more value in a space, you take better care of it. And foraging is absolutely a way to see more value in the space around you.

Alie: That being said, I always end on your favorite thing about it, but how do you even pick a favorite thing about it? I also feel like your microbiome must be *so good!* You must have such a healthy microbiome.

Alexis: I don't know, I eat normal things too. Like right now, I do have a glass of a redbud and dandelion fermented beverage that I just bottled earlier this week. And I'm like, "Yay! Good gut bacteria! We love to see an active fermenting drink." But I also ate two Oreos for breakfast this morning, so... Jury's out on that one. I guess I don't get sick a lot. *[laughs]*

Alie: What about your favorite thing about it? What just gives you butterflies?

Alexis: Oh man, getting to see, either in real time or to have people relay to me, like, a breakthrough that they have had or a special moment that they have now had in their surroundings because of my content. One of my best, best, best friends has never been super outdoorsy, but she loves food. An amazing chef. So, her foray into the outdoors has been through foraging, and watching the lightbulb go off for her now when we go on hikes together and, you know, watching her being able to recognize things so confidently on her own, I'm just like, "Yeah!! That's why I do the thing that I do!"

Those moments supersede the negatives by so many degrees and make me feel like I'm doing something beneficial, I guess. I hope.

So ask smart people simple questions because chances are they do what they do because they really love what they do. And you never know, you might, I don't know, get hit by a bus, so you might as well ask questions. Also, follow Alexis. Turns out, she's a fellow ologite and she listened to the show before I ever reached out! Which was so cool to learn. She is @BlackForager on [TikTok](#), on [Twitter](#), and on [Instagram](#). So, do follow her.

We are @Ologies on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). I'm @AlieWard on [both](#). Thank you to all the patrons at [Patreon.com/Ologies](#), where you can join for just one tiny dollar a month and submit questions. Thank you, Erin Talbert, for adminning the [Ologies Podcast Facebook](#) page. Thank you Emily White of The Wordary, who makes our transcripts. Thank you to Caleb Patton, who bleeps them. Bleeped episodes and transcripts are available for free at the link in the show notes. Ologies merch is available at [OlogiesMerch.com](#). Thank you, Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch of the comedy podcast *You Are That* for managing that. Thank you to Susan Hale and Noel Dilworth, who help with social media and scheduling.

Thank you to main squeeze and huge editing hero Jarrett Sleep of Mindjam Media. And longtime editor, newly unmustached, Steven Ray Morris of the podcasts *The Purrrcast* and *See Jurassic Right*. Oh my 'stache! They both shaved this week! Steven and Jarrett! People are vaxxed, 'staches are

waxed, wow. Springtime in America. And Nick Thorburn of the band Islands did the music. They have a new album due out in June. And if you're listening to this before 5pm Pacific on May 18th, go get a ticket for the live show. It's *Ologies'* first live show. It's with Jess Phoenix, the Volcanologist.

And you know I tell a secret at the end of each episode, and tonight, the secret, today, is I don't know if I'll ever do another live show again. I don't know. This is just kind of a test. I'm a little bit like, "What did I get myself into? I hope this is fun. I hope I do this okay." Anyway, yes, it is with Volcanologist Jess Phoenix. I may try to make a cone hat so that my hair spews out of the top like a volcano, but I don't know if that's just too much. I'm gonna try to do it.

Anyway, that's the secret: I'm not sure if I'm ever going to do a live show. So, if you're listening, I don't know, get a ticket. Who knows? See you tonight, maybe. Berbye.

Transcribed by Emily White at TheWordary.com

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