The Signs of Spring: Learning From and With the Land

By Sandra Walker

When you work outdoors in nature, in wild spaces, you soon learn to read the signs that the natural world is posting as to what is to come next. These signs are in the sky: the clouds, sun, and wind, and what, where, and how birds are flying and flocking. You learn, over time, which clouds indicate a potential storm, and whether that storm might include hail, which clouds indicate clearing skies. You learn which birds stay all winter, and where you are likely to find them, and which migrate home here first, which migrate through here, and which ones indicate winter is coming on their migrations south. The signs are also in the plants, insects, and all the other animals you see and the behavior they are displaying.

As a plant lover, for me, the first plant sign of spring is prairie onions (*Allium textile*). When I first began studying ethnobotany (a science I learn more about every year), I could not tell a prairie onion from a blade of grass when they first showed in the spring. I could only tell it was a prairie onion when it put out its flower buds in early May. But now I have learned that the first green blades coming up from under the ground are prairie onion leaves, not grass. Prairie onion leaves are sickle-shaped and tubular, thicker than a blade of grass. Prairie onions flower in May or early June, forming ball-like clusters of small white flowers, sometimes with a slight pinkish hue. A further clue to this being prairie onion is that prairie onions smell like onions! If it doesn't smell like an onion, then it is not an onion. If you find a plant that matches the description of a prairie onion, but there is none of the distinctive smell of onion, it is very likely death camas (*Zigadenus venenosus*) which is, as indicated in its name, poisonous. Another sign of death camas versus prairie onion is that death camas flowers come in a full spike at the end of the flower stalk, not in a small compact ball. They also tend to drop downward towards the ground**. IF IT DOESN'T SMELL LIKE AN ONION, IT IS NOT AN ONION. DO NOT EAT IT.**

However, if it smells like an onion, it is delicious. Prairie onions are small in size but big in flavor and you can use the whole plant from bulbs, leaves, to flowers, and also the seeds can be used as a seasoning. I would describe the flavour of prairie onions as

a blend between a garlic and onion. I grow them in my yard in a sandy area. They are easy to grow and are self seeding. I collect the seeds and take them out to my favorite wild spaces and I take on the role of “seed fairy”. I was walking an area that I have been seeding the last few years and I was pleased to see that my efforts in seeding these areas has worked.

If you choose to take on the role of seed fairy, learn as much as you can about the plant first. You want to spread its seeds only in those places where it would normally grow. You also want to use the seeds from plants that are nearby. My prairie onion seeds came from my garden, the seeds came from a *local* supply company, so these seeds are appropriate to sow in the wild places that have lost some of their biodiversity. To me prairie onions are the first sign of spring and indicate there will be some other delicious things to come. It is the prairie onion green leaves which are the first green blades you see in the spring, and I can recognize them from 100 metres away. They are also one of spring’s first flowers, shortly after the poplar and willow trees, and close to the time of the crocus.

Not only am I continuing to study ethnobotany, but I like to try cooking with wild plants.

Cheese & Prairie Onion Sauce

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1¼ cup milk
- 1 cup aged cheddar
- 10 prairie onion bulbs and flower heads
- Pepper to taste

Pre-heat oven to 350°F. Melt butter in a saucepan, add flour and slowly add milk, stirring constantly until mixture thickens (about ten minutes). Add onions and cheese and stir until the cheese is melted. This sauce is fabulous on asparagus omelettes.

To make macaroni and cheese with crab, add ¼ cup of crabmeat to the cooked sauce. Boil 1 cup of dry macaroni and strain. Mix macaroni with the cheese sauce and pour into a buttered baking dish. Sprinkle the top with grated cheese. Bake for 20-25 minutes or until the cheese on top has melted and is a golden colour. Macaroni is a “comfort food” but this comfort food is gourmet!