

## **Fiddlehead Frenzy**

As a young unfurled fern, *Matteucia struthiopteris* is commonly known as a “fiddlehead” for obvious reasons, but as a mature fanned-out plant, it looks more like the tail feathers of its other namesake: ostrich fern.

Picking and eating fiddleheads is a Maritime and Maine spring tradition, and according to the Canadian Encyclopedia, the fiddlehead is the most important edible fern and the only native Canadian plant that has achieved commercial success as a vegetable. The ostrich fern grows in all of Canada’s provinces and even in pockets of all three territories and Alaska, as well as in northeastern United States, as far south as Virginia.

The best places to hunt fiddleheads are along river and stream banks, in open woodlands, and at the edges of swamps and marshes. They should be picked away from roadsides and other areas where they might be contaminated with pollution, herbicides and pesticides. Although it is impossible to pin down reliable statistics on fiddlehead sales, annual North American sales likely stand at between 7 and 10 million dollars.

The First Nations People in North America were the first to discover and reap the nutritional benefits of fiddleheads which are a source of iron, potassium, niacin, riboflavin, magnesium, phosphorus and vitamins A and C. When either eaten whole, steeped in tea or made up in a spring tonic, they are said to aid with issues like constipation, scurvy and high blood pressure.

Most people would say that the best way to serve fiddleheads is straight up or with a simple dot of butter and a sprinkling of salt and pepper in order to fully enjoy their fresh and wholesome qualities. However, others have created a variety of cream or other types of sauces to accompany fiddleheads. The young ferns can also be incorporated in stir-fries, stews, casseroles and soups. They are easily frozen after a quick one-minute blanching and cool-down period.