

BACKPACKER

THE MAGAZINE OF WILDERNESS TRAVEL

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Longest Trails

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When Christopher Nyerges says, "Let's eat out," he means it.

HOW DO YOU LIKE YOUR CACTUS?

We are descending into the canyon from the street.

Autumn in late afternoon. Scorched chaparral country. He has been naming off bushes and plants and trees and birds since we stepped out of the car.

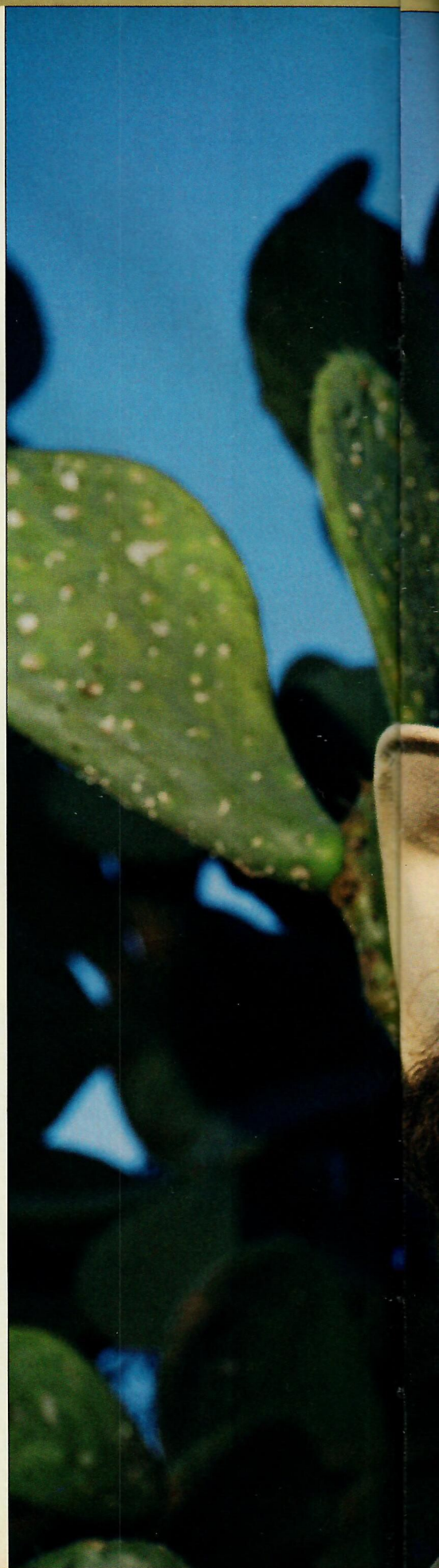
"Oleander. Another transplant from the Mediterranean. Chock full of cyanide. They say in Arabia husbands used it to discreetly eliminate unfaithful wives. Some Girl Scout made a hot dog stick out of a limb a few years ago and died.

"That's laurel sumac. You can use it for mosquito repellent. It's not the best but it's not bad. Indians rubbed it on themselves to mask their scent when they went hunting."

He stops, kneels beside a jagged plant, pinches off several of the burning red leaves, and eats them. "Poison oak." He stands up chewing, bits of scarlet showing between his lips. "You know, during World War II in the English countryside there were whole families that survived off all kinds of odd things, including stinging-nettles."

We keep moving, gliding down into the Arroyo Seco, a canyon that zigzags deep into the Gabrielino Mountains of California. John Muir, father of all intrepid campers, described the Gabrielinos as the most impenetrable range he'd ever hiked. It's easy to see why. From crenulated peaks and crests, steep and sometimes densely thatched walls drop thousands of feet into sheer, hidden canyons. Were it not for the thin ribbon of highway snaking in and out high above the canyon, we could be anywhere. A hundred miles from civilization. A thousand. As it is, as the hawk flies, we're only three miles from the

BY MARK JENKINS • PHOTOS BY MOJGAN B. AZIMI





Would you trust your stomach to this man? Master forager Christopher Nyerges surrounded by appetizers.

residential suburbs of Pasadena, 15 miles from Hollywood, no more than 20 from downtown L.A.

The sky is a bluish rose. The air is dry and supple. It's warm, and we're sweating, and I slip back in time.

University. A history class. The professor, academic in mind, body, and soul, queries, "If you were stranded on a deserted island with just one person, who would it be?"

One woman says Cat Stevens. Another Gloria Steinem. A little weird-eyed fellow in the back yells Albert Einstein. Someone else shouts Marilyn Monroe. It's college. Every one of us is libidinous, libertine, and perfectly impractical.

And we'd have all died, just like that Girl Scout.

If you were really stuck on an island, or for that matter just lost in the backcountry, you'd want a partner who knows something about staying alive. Someone who might just know which plants are edible and which are poisonous. Someone who knows where to find water. Someone who knows how to snare a rabbit with a length of yucca. Such a person would be Christopher Nyerges: Los Angeles resident, ex-Mensa member, NRA dues-payer, former hobo, columnist, naturalist, survivalist.

His head cocks sideways and I snap back into the present. Turning, I just catch a sliver of color disappearing against the mountains. "Redtail ... looking for dinner just like us," says Nyerges (pronounced NAIR-gesh).

It's the beginning of a three-day backpacking jaunt. Nothing unusual really, other than the fact that we've brought no food. And no stove. And no tent.

Also along are Charles Head, Christopher's 12-year-old grandson by marriage, Tim Snider, an ethnobotanist, and Ramah, a muscled pit bull harnessed with panniers and a heavy chain.

Snider is a narrow, bashful man. At rest he is prone to leaning on his staff mountain-man fashion and stroking his

beard. He is utterly taciturn on all subjects but trees. Trees are his passion. He knows not only their Latin monickers and secular nicknames, but the family trees of most trees. Point to one, and he will break his silence. "*Eucalyptus globulus*, blue gum. They were transplanted from Australia for railroad ties before the turn of the century. But then they found out they weren't very good for that purpose. They tend to twist when they dry. Make good firewood, though."

I nod at another.

"California bay. Indians said the leaves would cure a headache, but I think that's just another white man story. I think it *gives* you a headache. A lot of Indian 'remedies' for white men were practical jokes."

Charles isn't listening. He's a kid. His sleeping bag is sliding off his daypack and bouncing on the back of his knees like a Batman cape. He's along for the adventure. He's laughing at Ramah and telling me about his latest video game and his stepdad, who he likes, and his kid brother, who bugs him, and how on the last trip with his grandfather he had to sleep in a hole without a sleeping bag. I ask him what his friends at school thought about it.

"They said it sounded like it sucked."

We reach the canyon bottom where there's a campground. The camp host is gone, his trailer guarded by two wolves. Nyerges scribbles a note on a piece of litter he picks up, then slowly walks toward the wolves, arms spread wide, palms open. The wolves howl and growl and circle him nervously. The figure of supplication, Nyerges moves directly into their midst. He reaches the trailer, leaves the note in the door, and backs away, never taking his eyes off the animals.

Charles and Snider don't notice. They're used to this kind of thing.

When I first spoke to Nyerges a month earlier, I asked him to identify some of the time-honored myths about living

off the land. The more famous examples glorified by folklore and Hollywood—Tarzan, Crocodile Dundee, Daniel Boone—all relied heavily on a big knife or a big gun.

The phone line hummed quietly for a few seconds. "What does it *really* take to live off the land?" he repeated. Another long pause. "Just two things." But then he wouldn't tell me what they were. "Why don't you come find out for yourself?"

We start up the Gabrielino

Trail, a dirt road that parallels a creek. We haven't gone a hundred yards when Nyerges stops, slides out half a dozen large Ziploc bags tucked in his belt, and pops one open.

"The acorn was the Hahamongha's potato." He's standing beneath a vast canyon live oak, the limbs drooping with swags of plum-size acorns, speaking of a tribe long since gone from these lands. "They're too bitter to eat raw. We'll leach them." In two minutes he and Snider fill the bag.

Fifteen paces from the oak he stops again and smoothly strips a dozen leaves from a fuzzy, cream-colored bush. "White sage. For tea. We can also use it as an herb."

Charles has already disappeared up ahead. Snider has stopped beside



Don't try this at home: Nyerges points out features of an edible Amanita mushroom. In 1988, four of five people who ate a similar but toxic Amanita sustained permanent liver damage and eventually needed transplants.

Nyerges moves into the briar patch, delicately slicing off the fuchsia-colored fruits and dropping them into a paper sack. It occurs to me that for him, hiking this canyon is like moving through the vegetable aisle of a supermarket.

another seemingly inconsequential bush. "Too bad," he whispers.

We walk over. "Too late in the season?" asks Nyerges. Snider nods. Nyerges still manages to collect a small handful of dark purple berries. "Nightshade. All parts of this plant, even the berries when they are immature, contain belladonna. A poison. Causes convulsions, cramps, death. But when the berries are ripe, they taste like tiny tomatoes." He drops several into my hand. "What do you think?"

"Tiny bitter tomatoes."

We make less than a quarter mile before Nyerges wanders off the road down to the creek. Snider and I follow. He is straddling two boulders, the stream running between his legs. "Watercress. Introduced by the San Gabriel monks in the 17th century. It's part of the mustard family, related to the horseradish."

He moves up along the stream, picking clumps and stuffing them inside another Ziploc. "Ah ha! Lambsquarter. Sustenance!" He's honestly excited. Ramah barks and wiggles his blunt body.

"Lambsquarter is essentially wild spinach." He begins listing the nutritional contents of this plant as if he were examining a label on a can. Then he recommends recipes, as if reading from the back of a box. In a few minutes another bag is full.

Further up the road we find Charles waiting for us beside an enormous cactus patch. He knows food (or at least what his grandfather considers food) when he sees it. It's prickly pear cactus. Nyerges lops off several heavy pads, carefully packs them in a bag and hands them to me. He then moves deep into the briar patch, delicately slicing off the crown-shaped, fuchsia-colored fruits and dropping them into a paper sack. Watching him so at home, it occurs to me that for Nyerges, hiking up this canyon is like moving through the vegetable aisle of a supermarket.

We reach camp in another hour.

It's almost dark. All of us immediately begin collecting firewood.

Searching in the shadows I come across strange, gigantic, overgrown ruins. Circular terraces with stone walls. A stone hearth. Several concrete picnic tables. Whatever this place once was, nature has reclaimed it. Trees sprout from the terrace walls. Brush and grass camouflage unnatural shapes.

I drag in a few large, downed branches and begin stomping them into chunks. Nyerges and Charles appear with a log, and Nyerges begins answering my unasked questions. "The Hahamongha used to move up and down the Arroyo Seco, hunting, gathering, cultivating, and pruning natural plots. Then in the 1750s the monks came and it's the same old story. The Indians died. Disease. Or simply killed for not converting. Taken as slaves. But then after another hundred years, the monks also disappeared."

As he shows Charles how to light a fire with a block of magnesium, he keeps talking. "Starting in the late 1880s the Arroyo Seco was developed. There were cabins all along in here. That's why there was an

old road most of the way. In the 1920s and '30s this place, Oakwilde, was a resort. A high-class lodge. This was back when hiking was big. Like in Europe. Hollywood types would come up here in their knickers and neckties and hike. There was also hunting. Ducks and deer."

Snider has carried in a load of firewood and is now examining a small leaf, rubbing it between his fingers. "It all ended in '38," he says without looking up. He is smelling his hands. "Flash flood washed most of it away."

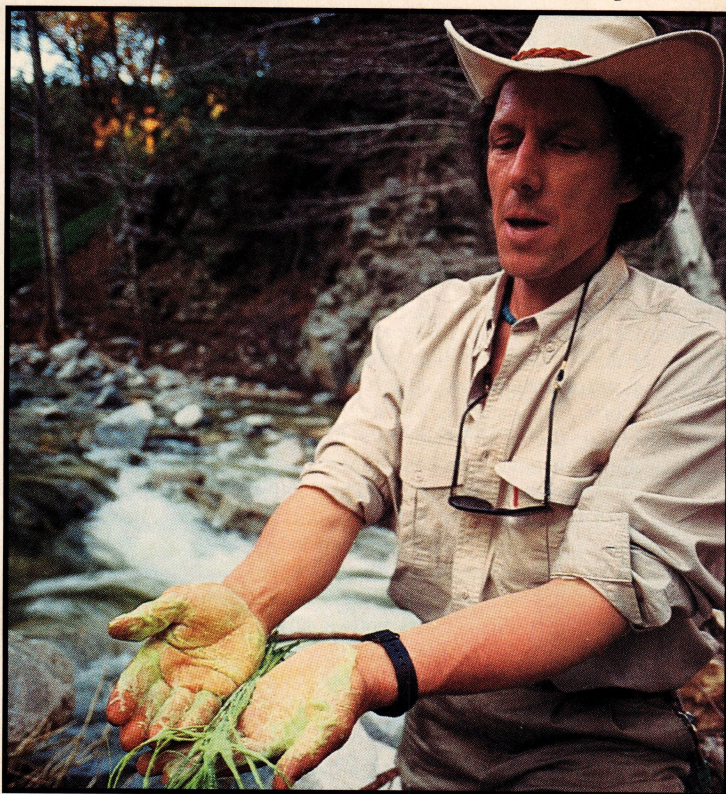
"Hiking was going out of style by then anyway," says Nyerges. "Everybody wanted a car."

Charles strikes sparks onto the tiny pyramid of tinder and magnesium shavings. A fire bursts to life.

"So," Nyerges says, looking at me over the flames, "it has come back to us."

We'll sleep near the fire under the stars. I take out my sleeping bag and bivouac sack. I am carrying almost nothing else. On the phone Nyerges said I wouldn't need much. "Just bring your head." Before I came I weighed my pack: 6 pounds, 9 ounces.

Nyerges has carried an ancient, battered frame pack adorned with two coffee cans hanging by wires to our encampment. He found them. They are our pots. His sleeping bag is a dirty, heavy thing retrieved from a dumpster. The stuffing is coming out in places. His coat is a handsewn capote made from an old wool blanket. No hiking boots. No



Yucca has been used as a cleanser in the Southwest for decades. It contains saponin, which produces lather when agitated with water. Commercial saponins put the head on your beer and help clean your shorts.

His sleeping bag was retrieved from a dumpster. His coat is made from an old wool blanket. No hiking boots. No wool socks. No polypropylene. He wore street clothes for this trip, as if this life were no different than his life in Los Angeles.

wool socks. No polypropylene. He did not change for this trip. He wore his street clothes, as if this life were no different than his life in Los Angeles.

While Nyerges prepares something in the coffee cans, Charles, Snider, and I sit on our haunches around the campfire and work on the acorns. Pop the cap off with your thumb, crack the green shell with your teeth, peel. One after another. Other than knives, we brought no utensils. When the acorns are finished we each fashion a set of chopsticks. We also brought no soap. We wash our hands by rubbing yucca spears together in the creek.

For dinner we have watercress soup with grass seeds, cactus stew with herbs, and white sage tea. Afterward, Nyerges passes out licorice sticks for cleaning our teeth. We did not bring toothbrushes.

Late that night, we use velvety mullein leaves for toilet paper and drink from the dark, moonlit pools of the stream like all nocturnal animals.

In my dreams I hear the deer moving through the trees.

For breakfast we have bay leaf tea and

sautéed watercress. For lunch, the same. I think we are all a little hungry, especially Charles. When I mention this to Nyerges he says, "You ever see a picture of a fat Indian?"

I'm tempted to ask him about the nutritional value of plants. Can you really survive on this stuff? For how long? Native Americans, after all, also ate deer, rabbit, pronghorn, bear, bison, fish. But I don't because Nyerges isn't a dietician. He's a man who knows how to survive for a short amount of time on nature's basics. That's the point. Survival.

Although we could have spent the day foraging, we didn't. Charles explored up and down the creek, made rafts out of twigs and bombed them with rocks, carved on sticks, climbed trees, panned for gold. Snider took several "species ID walks." Nyerges patiently kept at the acorns, pouring off the boiling brown liquid and refilling the can at the creek with water.

"People tend to think that early Indians simply grazed their way across the land like antelope," he says. "Nothing could be more ridiculous. Much of their food was processed. Acorns, for instance. To save labor, instead of leaching by boiling, they'd tie them in a fiber bag and put them into the river for several weeks. They had special ways to jerk their meat and dry wild fruit. They had a complex and sophisticated society. They made use of everything. They did not live off the land, they lived with it."

After several hours, Nyerges tastes the acorns and declares that the bitter acid has been boiled out. He goes down to the creek and returns with a large, flat stone and sets it in the dirt.

"*Metate*." He dumps the acorns out onto the stone. He scouts around camp and comes back with a smooth, round rock the size of his fist.

"*Mano*," he says, tipping his felt hat back and looking up at me.

"Two things. Two things, *mano y metate*. You can't have one without the other." He's grinning at me. He knows I don't understand.

"You're the one who wanted to know what it took to live off the land. Remember?"

In the afternoon Charles, Snider, and I scale one of the sharp ridges just for the view.

When we get back to camp Nyerges has supper on. He says he used the afternoon "to hunt and to gather," and smiles mischievously. "Want to see what I got?"

I expect to peek into one of the coffee cans and find a squirrel or a small bird. Instead, he points to the concrete picnic table, a structure that could not be more incongruent if it were in the middle of the jungle. On the table are arrayed a rusted but still operational switchblade, a wood-handled meat knife, a new, completely unscratched pair of Bausch & Lomb sunglasses, and a pair of white, barely worn leather basketball shoes.

Nyerges holds up his arm. "Found this floating down the middle of the stream." He's wearing a diving watch, big and expensive.

It's another obtuse lesson.

"OK. What do you say we do a sweat?"

A sweat? I glance over at Charles. He's gleefully bobbing his head.

Each with our own knife, we set off into the dense underbrush. We cut eight 10-foot willows tapering from the diameter of a quarter down to that of a dime. Back at camp, we bend the willows into arches and bind them together with yucca twine. The framework looks like the skeleton of a small yurt. Snider has brought along a large tarp. He drapes it over the structure. We collect a pile of stones. Half of them we use to hold down the tarp. The other half we drop into the campfire.

By then it's time for dinner. A five-course wilderness meal:

Charcoal Prickly Pear Appetizer: Shove the little fruits onto the end of a stick, burn off the spines, eat out the insides. They taste like pomegranates.

Arroyo Broth Soup: 1 cup acorn mush, 1 cup watercress, 4 cups creek water. Could pass for a bitter potato soup.

Gabrielino Grande Salad: 2 cups diced cactus, 2 cups chopped lambsquarter, 2 cups watercress, 1 whole garlic, lightly spread with oil and vinegar. Damn tasty.

Habamongba Repast and Watercress Casserole: The repast—3 cups leached and crushed canyon live oak acorns, ¼ cup biscuit mix, ¼ cup potato flour. Reminiscent of refried beans. The casserole—2 cups chopped watercress, ¼ cup sautéed prickly pear cactus, ¼ cup potato flour, garlic, herbs. Bitter but not bad.

The feast fills our bellies and fires our tongues. Snider spins more stories of the history of the region. There's an old bicycle highway nearby that was built entirely from the wood of local trees. And some of the local orange trees came from Italy, others from Greece, still others from Morocco.

Nyerges, at my prompting, reveals more of his own history. Finding Indian mentors to guide him when he was a young man. Making meals from weeds found in vacant lots. Scavenging in alleys. Sleeping under highway overpasses. Going into the desert with nothing. Homesteading in the middle of L.A. (He took over an abandoned house, repaired it, got the utilities hooked up, turned the yard into a wild foods garden, and lived happy and carefree and rent-free until he was evicted.)

It occurs to me that I have probably never met a more

resourceful man. Nor a man more knowledgeable about the outdoors.

By the time the stories end, the head-size stones we dropped in the fire are glowing. Nyerges hands me one of the coffee cans and I run down to the creek. When I get back he has dug a hole inside the yurt and is trenching a path to the campfire. Charles has matted the inside of the yurt with mugwort and Snider has crafted a forked shovel from a limb.

There are no prayers. No singing. No incense. Standing around the campfire, the four of us simply take off all our clothes.

"It's not the ceremony that matters," says Nyerges, "just the why."

Using a long pole, I begin prying the scarlet stones out of the fire while Nyerges hurriedly shovels them down the trench into the sweat. The stones look like giant primeval gems pulled up from the center of the earth. Sparks scatter about our bare feet and flames bounce off the ground. We are laughing and sweating and freezing.

Then it's into the sweat. Down on our hands and knees crawling. Sit in a circle. Drop the flap. Heat circles around us like the hands of ghosts. No one speaks. We begin to sweat.

Dark orange shadows from the campfire leap across the walls as if we were inside a cave. When Nyerges pours the can of water onto the brilliant stones they hiss like serpents and their white breath burns our faces. Our muscles melt. We drip like candles.

It is silent and dark inside. Just the soft sound of the heat. Just the smell of the stones. Were the shell made of mud rather than nylon, this could be happening a millennium ago. Three naked men and a boy sitting cross-legged in a sweat in the wilderness.

Inside a sweat you can do some good thinking. It is nothing profound or magical. It's very simple, very physical. Your body becomes liquid and your mind becomes lucid and everything just flows.

I remember I retraced our trip. I hiked all the way back to my first conversation with Christopher Nyerges. Had I solved the mystery of what it *really* takes to live off the land? Did I know the two things?

I think so. I think so.

Resources

Nyerges publishes a newsletter, "Talking Leaves," available for \$2 a year, and is author of *Guide to Wild Foods*, \$15. He also offers courses covering outdoors skills such as foraging, wild food cooking, and survival techniques. Contact: Christopher Nyerges, Survival Services, P.O. Box 41834, Los Angeles, CA 90041; (213) 255-9502.

"The Wild Foods Forum" newsletter, P.O. Box 61413, Virginia Beach, VA 23462; (804) 421-3929; \$15 per year (6 issues), \$2 for a sample issue. A fun way to keep up on wild foods and wild food cooking.

The Basic Essentials of Edible Wild Plants and Useful Herbs, by Jim Meuninck, ICS Books, 1370 E. 86th Place, Merrillville, IN 46410; (800) 541-7323; \$6. A beginner's book on foraging.



STALKING YOUR DINNER

There are only a few rules that are truly helpful for distinguishing edible plants from those that are poisonous. Most often, you simply need to learn what the darn things look, smell, and feel like. The best and most interesting way to do this is to go out with an expert. It's possible to teach yourself from guidebooks, but we don't recommend it.

In North America there are six common, easily recognizable wild food families:

Mustards: These are flowering herbs with four sepals and four often colorful petals. The pods can be long and narrow, short and roundish or flattened. Examples include wild radish, watercress, toothwort, and shepherdspurse.

Grasses: Variety is endless, from alpine rock-huggers to bamboo forests. The two main edible forms are the young blades and the mature seed. Well-known grasses include crabgrass, bluegrass, rye, sorghum, and sugar cane. Caution: Do not eat any moldy grass seed, it can kill you.

Seaweeds: These marine algae are not differentiated into roots, stems, and leaves but frequently take the form of large clumps of knobby strands. Red, green, and brown algae are all edible. Never pick around waste water dumps. Also make sure the seaweed is fresh and has no foreign growths.

Acorns: These are the fruit of oak trees. Acorns can rarely be eaten raw due to their high concentration of bitter tannic acid, which must be leached out. Some common oaks include black oak, Engelmann oak, live oak, and valley oak.

Onions: These are actually perennial herbs of the lily family. They have a leafless flower stalk that shoots up from an underground bulb. Examples include swamp onions, garlic, leeks, chives, and shallots. Caution: There are poisonous members of the lily family that closely resemble onions. If they lack the distinctive onion aroma, do not eat!

Cacti: Unmistakable porcupine-like plants found in most arid climates, cacti are perennial succulents. The tender, non-woody flesh (watery and bland) and the fruit (delicious) of all cacti are edible. Types include the saguaro, hedgehog, and prickly pear.

Here are some general plant picking guidelines:

1. Waste not want not; never pick more than you'll eat.
2. Take only the parts of a plant you will use.
3. Pick leaves one at a time and never completely strip a plant.
4. When you intend to eat the roots, keep the largest and replant the smallest.
5. Harvest only those plants in abundance.
6. Check with the land management agency to make sure picking vegetation is allowed.

A note on impact: Activities like building a large stone-heating fire and a sweat lodge are, to say the least, high impact. The key is your location. In Nyerges' case, we sought out the local ranger and got permission to build the sweat lodge. The important point is that while some activities are allowed in certain locales, they may be highly unethical and possibly illegal in other spots. Again, we stress: Check with the land management agency to see what's allowed before you start moving rocks or nibbling on the foliage.

—M. Jenkins and C. Nyerges

