

Factsheet Nº 2

From weeds to wild edibles

INTRODUCTION

In conventional agriculture, weeds are often seen as a nuisance, but a deeper understanding of their role in ecosystems reveals their value as wild edibles and ecological indicators. By shifting our perspective, we can integrate these plants into agroecological systems, promoting biodiversity, soil health, and even food security. In Portugal, 74 different wild edible plants have been recorded in agricultural fields, demonstrating the untapped potential of these species.

 Understanding wild edibles and agroecological interactions

Plants and animals interact holistically within landscapes. Getting to know the plants that grow in a particular area—including those often-considered weeds—is crucial for sustainable land management. Traditional knowledge, passed down through generations, offers valuable insight into the role of these plants. Depending on soil conditions and management practices, different wild edible species emerge. For example, fields fertilized with manure tend to have a higher prevalence of *Stellaria media* (chickweed) and *Urtica dioica* (nettle), which thrive in nitrogen-rich soils. Other common edible weeds in Portugal include *Galium aparine* (sticky weed), *Silene alba*, *Rumex*, *Geranium spp.*, *Calendula arvensis*, and *Matricaria*.

PRACTICAL MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

1 Know your weeds

Understanding which plants grow in your fields and their ecological function is key. Some weeds indicate soil health conditions. For example, **chickweed** signals high nitrogen levels, making it ideal to pair with nitrogen-demanding crops like tomatoes. **Rumex** thrives in low-nutrient soils and could be paired with crops requiring fewer nutrients, such as cabbages.

2 Companion planting for balance

Some weeds serve as pollinator attractors. For instance, **dead nettle** has strong-smelling flowers that attract bees but may also draw pests. Pairing it with pest-repelling plants enhances ecological balance.

3 Soil moisture retention

In hot climates, wild greens and a **drip irrigation system** can help maintain soil moisture.

4 Diverse uses

Wild greens can be used in salads, teas, and even medicine, fostering a new relationship between farmers and their land.



FIGURE 1. *Community weed picking*
(cc: Living Seeds Sementes Vivas)



Cultural landscape - the role of wildlife

Portugal's Lusitanic landscapes host the **Javali** (wild boar), which plays an essential role in the ecosystem by disturbing the soil and influencing plant distribution. Their feeding habits explain the presence of species like **Plantago** (plantain), which thrives in areas where wild boars dig for roots.

Building resilient communities through wild edibles

Wild edible plants provide essential minerals and nutrients, making them valuable beyond their seasonal availability. **Preserving them** through drying, fermentation, and tinctures ensures year-round benefits. They also serve as natural medicine—**pennywort leaves** can be used for wound healing, while **prickly lettuce tinctures** aid sleep.

TIPS

-  **Engage with local knowledge:** Speaking with elders helps preserve traditional wisdom about edible weeds and their uses.
-  **Reframing weeds as resources:** Many farmers see nettles as a problem due to their stinging properties, but educating them on their uses (e.g., compost, herbal remedies) can shift perceptions.
-  **Partnerships for sustainable land use:** Creating collaborations where people harvest edible weeds from farms benefits both landowners (who get weed removal) and foragers (who gain free resources).
-  **Cultural connections:** Portugal has deep Celtic-Iberian roots with strong ties to shamanic traditions, reinforcing the importance of reconnecting with the land's natural offerings.



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