In Nature’s Garden

Wild Onion

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Illustrated by Lucile Walton

It may be distressing to some people to think of beautiful lilies in the same family as odoriferous onions. But there they are—lilies, trillium, Solomon’s seal, asparagus and onions all grouped into one enormous and extremely fascinating family, the Liliaceae.

A number of liliaceous garden flowers such as lilies themselves, hyacinths, scyllas, star-of-Bethlehem and fritillaries spring from fleshy underground bulbs similar to those of onions. Possession of a large food reserve in the form of a bulb makes possible early growth and flowering although in onions, genus *Allium*, it is only the leaves which show this early growth, the flowers usually blooming much later. In *Allium cernuum* (nodding wild onion) flowers bloom mainly in August.

In all species of *Allium* the inflorescence is an umbel; frequently the flowers are small and pinkish-purple with protruding yellow stamens. Although Kingsbury reports some cases of onion-poisoning in cattle by the wild onion *Allium cernuum*, the cows must have eaten tremendous amounts of the plant, because, in general, all members of the genus are considered edible—almost essential for some countries. Where would France be without garlic (*A. sativum*)?

Bulbs of *Allium tricoccum*, the wild leek or ramp, are clustered, like garlic, but the cluster is not covered with a membrane and the cloves are much larger, sometimes more than two inches long and as thick as a man’s thumb. In early spring these bulbs each send up a little cylinder of tightly rolled broad leaves, which unroll at the tip until the plant looks like a small garden leek (*Allium Porrum*). Bulbs and leaves can be cut up and cooked. In North Carolina, the approved initiation dish for this piece of wild cooking is “ramps an’ rice.” Several towns in that state sponsor a Ramp Festival in summer. Ramp bulbs can be used for soup, chopped up in salad dressing, or pickled on their own. The leaves die down in late spring before the naked flower scape, with an umbel of greenish-white flowers, makes its summer appearance. After this dies down ramps must be spotted by pointed bulb tips protruding from the ground.

Various members of the onion genus have succored many Indian tribes and early travelers in this country.

In the Menomini Indian language the word for wild leek is the same as that for skunk (both are smelly). ‘Shikako’ means ‘skunk place’ and is the origin of the present name Chicago, in aboriginal times noted as a locality with an abundance of wild leeks. *Allium* is Latin for ‘garlic’ and the Celtic word *all*, meaning ‘hot’ or ‘burning,’ describes the effect most members of the genus have on one’s eyes.

*Allium vineale* or field garlic, a very strong, coarse onion with a penetrating odor and taste, is on the whole to be avoided. Cows seem to thrive on it, frequently giving their milk a distinctly garlicky flavor.

Chives or *Allium Schoenoprasum* was introduced from Eurasia and is mainly a cultivated species, with an attractive delicate flavor, excellent for use in soups and salads. *Allium Cepa* is the ordinary onion which has several different varieties and comes originally from Persia. Its close cousin the shallot, *Allium ascalonicum*, is cultivated more in Europe than in America which is a pity since it has a fine strong, distinctive flavor.

Nodding onion, *Allium cernuum*, is a modest and attractive member of the genus. It can be recognized by its bell-shaped, rose-colored flowers, in a loose umbel at the end of a flower scape about a foot or more high. The scape is bent back at the top like a shepherd’s crook, so that the flowers hang down (as if ‘nodding’). Bulbs are about ½” wide, 1” high; quite strong; and add considerable flavor to a soup or stew. If used as a vegetable, they are best boiled in two lots of water.

At Mountain Lake, *Allium cernuum* blooms in late August. When highbush blueberries are starting to go over, bottle gentians appear and nodding onion blooms.

Please be sure it is *Allium* you are dealing with before you start chewing on bulbs and early spring leaves. Bulbs of *Ornithogalum* or star-of-Bethlehem are poisonous. Lily-of-the-Valley is poisonous. Leaves of *Veratrum viride* or False Hellebore, which look rather leek-like, are extremely poisonous. There was a severe case of poisoning at the University of Virginia Hospital a few years ago in a young man who had mistakenly chewed on *Veratrum* leaves. Not everything about the lily family is beautiful, good and edible. Before flavoring with wild bulbs, be sure they really are ONIONS.