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Feeding fernsy

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: The rhizomes of *Dryopteris dilatata*, spreading wood fern, before processing and cooking.
(Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

The expression “carrying coals to Newcastle” might not convey much these days, but what it describes is among my favorite planting accidents.

Time was, Newcastle produced most of Britain’s coal. The idiom means “a pointless action,” seeing that it’s folly to deliver coal to where most coal is mined.

Considering the conditions that each plant prefers is even more important in propagating native flora than it is in the garden. We should not have to tinker with our native plantings, but let them return to their earth.

I was carrying coals to Newcastle when I brought some *Dryopteris dilatata*, or spreading wood fern, to a wet area of my land. I was trying to situate them between some devil’s club and a pawpaw I’d planted when I noticed a terrific crowding.

Autochthonous *dryopteris*, unlike mine which had been raised by pale Oregonians with tattoos, had blanketed the area. Had they been there in previous years, but I had only just learned to see them?

The upshot was that I could taste this native food without waiting years for it to establish and spread. I consulted some books and webpages and raced to the wetlands with a pitchfork and hori hori.

“You wouldn’t dare study more than one plant in a given year. You would be focused on one plant at most, and that study may go on for the rest of your life,” says Val Segrest of the Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project, which encourages children and adults to return to this land’s traditional foods and dietary practices.

I kept this in mind as I pulled and sawed at the armored pineapple of fern base, singing a song by way of thanks as I always do. I knew that this would not be as instantly rewarding as pulling a beet or even picking a wild blackberry, but I hoped that so many ferns presenting at once would give me some margin of error — and forgive my inevitable humble blunders.

I’d discovered in reading about fern rhizomes that they are not only eaten by Puget Sound tribes (in particular the Cowlitz), but also by rural Norwegians — after they’ve been converted into animal calories by ruminants.

That the Norse would think to harvest fern rhizomes for fodder but not eat them themselves boggles the mind, until you recall that Norwegian colonists chose to starve in Greenland rather than adopt any lifeways of the Inuit. One could frame this as a metaphor for our civilization, where many waste away amid plenty, failing to recognize the food forests obscured by billboards hawking empty calories. Big talk, for a guy who shops at Costco!

So I hosed off the rhizomes and put them in a crockpot, which is the closest I could get to traditional baking in a pit for 24 hours. I left them dry, which might have been my mistake.

I had no details of how the Puget Sound tribes baked the rhizomes. Was there any source of flavorsome moisture, like the seaweed used in a clam bake? Did anything smolder, providing seasoning? Were they turned for even cooking?

About six hours in I had forgotten they were there, and puzzled over the anonymous smell of hot artichokes. My friend Kathy Ross visited and thought I was baking parsnips or rutabagas. I remembered the rhizomes and restrained myself from tasting one; there can be toxicity if they're incorrectly prepared.

Another six hours later I couldn't wait. I tried to peel one and it shattered in my hand. All of them had dried to the consistency of twigs, their tender interiors (said to taste like sweet potato) but shriveled cores.

I recalled the cautions of Segrest. With a sigh at our orphanage in the world, I picked up the pitchfork en route to the wetlands.

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