



### THE CHALLENGE

## Forage your dinner

**Could you survive without food in the wilderness? Our hungry hiker went searching for sustenance in one of the nation's harshest environments to find out. By Gina DeMillo Wagner**

LIKE MANY OF US, I've watched episodes of *Survivor* and *Naked and Afraid* and wondered how I'd fare with only my wits and whatever I could scavenge from nature.

I grew up in the forested Southeast, where gathering food is as simple as plucking a few ripe blackberries, wild grapes, or any number of

edible herbs. But for the past few years, I've lived in the Arizona desert. Would I be able to find a meal here without skinning a rattlesnake?

First, some research. I bought a local edible plants book and scoured desert survivalist websites. I was surprised to read that many cacti are edible, if you can get past the razor-sharp spines and tough skin. Other plants, like yucca and agave, have edible parts, but can make you nauseous if you don't boil them first. Above all, the experts warned, you should be absolutely sure a plant is safe before taking a single bite (see how on next page).

To improve my chances, I drove a couple hours north

one May weekend to the Mogollon Rim, where the Colorado Plateau rises a few thousand feet above the Sonoran Desert. Its cooler temps and greater moisture translate to a wider menu of plants and wildlife. My plan: Hike in a couple miles and make a base camp from which I'd dayhike and forage.

At noon, I set out on a trail near my campsite, overturning rocks to look for grubs and crickets. But when I finally found some chubby white worms clinging to the underside of a stone, I shuddered. No doubt I could eat insects in a real survival situation (sautéed with garlic, maybe?), but I still had breakfast in the tank. I decided to hold out for something more appetizing. I eyed a stand of ponderosa pine, recalling I could make a fragrant tea from its needles. But tea is hardly a meal.

Two hours in and a couple miles down the trail with

nothing to show for it, I reminded myself that edible and tasty don't necessarily go hand in hand. I'd have to adjust my expectations if I wanted to eat. I eventually stumbled on a shallow, murky stream, most likely runoff from the rim above. Mosquitoes danced across the surface, and below I noticed something bigger moving along the bottom. Peering closer, I recognized it as a crayfish, something I'd seen hundreds of times growing up in Georgia. I grabbed the palm-size crustacean by its tail, careful to avoid its pinchers, and dropped it into my pack. I wanted to harvest more, but after searching another hour, I was growing impatient (and ravenous).

Back at camp, I dropped the lonely crayfish into a pot and tried to brainstorm an appropriate side dish. Looking around, there wasn't much to choose from except

pine needles and a few prickly pear cacti.

Prickly pear pads are about the size of a salad plate, with long spines and tiny, splinter-like barbs guarding the edible flesh. I jabbed a plump-looking specimen with my metal spork and cut it off at the base, then sliced off the barbed edges and stood the pad on end to filet it. I managed to prick my fingers a few times, but after 30 minutes I had a handful of gooey green insides. Though you can eat this raw, boiling yields a more pleasant flavor and reduces the slime factor, so I diced the cactus and tossed it into a pot of boiling water. After about 10 minutes, I tasted it and was pleasantly surprised: It was like a tangy green bean, with the texture of a cucumber.

Next, the crayfish, still writhing, went into the boiling water. He immediately turned pink, like a miniature lobster.

I let him boil for a good five minutes, then pulled apart his shell to reveal about an ounce of meat in his tail and tiny claws. The flavor wasn't bad, if bland: I found myself longing for a little butter and some Old Bay, and went to bed dreaming about the leftover meatloaf in my fridge back home.

### THE VERDICT

## FAIL

The meal provided fewer than 500 calories—I probably burned more than that just collecting it. In a survival situation, I would have been better off staying put and eating cactus (and grubs). But if I can find food in the desert, I can find it anywhere—and with practice, I'm pretty sure I could forage more calories than I burn.

### UNIVERSAL EDIBILITY TEST

Eating even a tiny bite of a toxic plant can cause extreme gastrointestinal problems, or even death. Survival experts devised this test to determine a plant's edibility. When in doubt, follow these steps before chowing down. It's a slow process, but necessary.

1. Separate the plant into its various parts—roots, stems, leaves, buds, and flowers. Focus on only one piece of the plant at a time.
2. Smell it. A strong, unpleasant odor is a bad sign.
3. Test for contact poisoning by placing a piece of the plant on your forearm or wrist for 15 minutes. If your skin burns, itches, feels numb,
- or breaks out in a rash, don't eat the plant.
4. If the plant passes the skin test, prepare a small portion the way you plan to eat it (boiling is always a good bet).
5. Before taking a bite, touch the plant to your lips to test for burning or itching. If there's no reaction after 15 minutes, take a small bite, chew it,
- and hold it in your mouth for several minutes. If the plant tastes very bitter or soapy, spit it out.
6. If there's no reaction in your mouth, swallow the bite and wait a few hours. If there's no ill effect, you can assume this part of the plant is edible. Repeat the test for other parts of the plant; some plants have both edible and inedible parts.

**Warning Signs** Certain characteristics indicate that a plant may be toxic, including thorns, shiny leaves, umbrella-shaped flowers, white or yellow berries, seed pods, milky sap, an almond scent, and leaves in groups of three. To determine if an unknown plant is safe to eat, use the Universal Edibility Test (next page).