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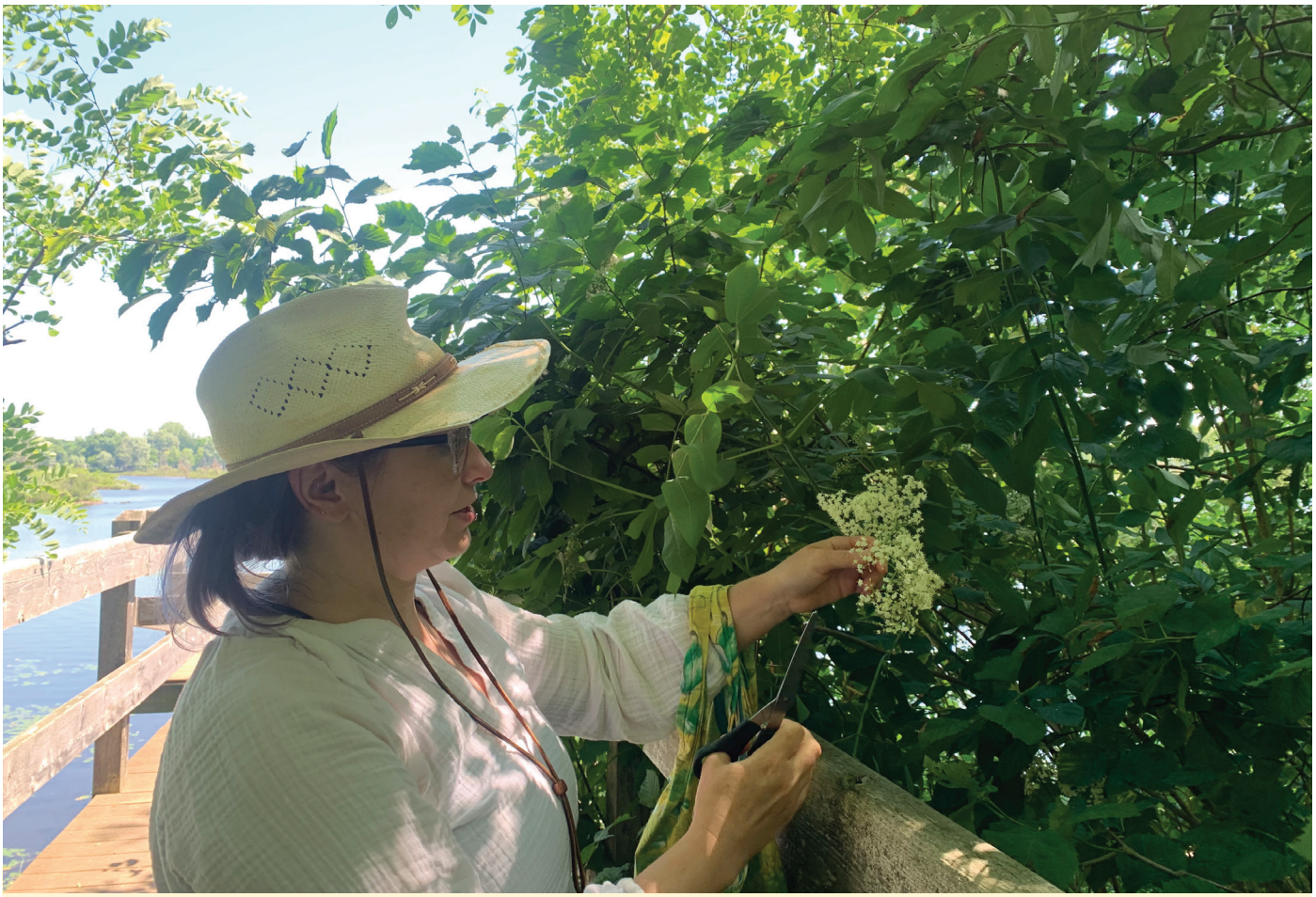
Digital Phenology:

An Elderflower Walk with Sara Lynch

BY CAMILLA AMMIRATI

Early Morels, Early Musings

"I am surprised they are out this early," one commenter said in a Facebook post, responding to a friend finding morel mushrooms in his yard in late April. "I just heard bluebirds. In February," commented a friend of mine, with both surprise and consternation, noting the birds' song trilling a few weeks earlier than normally expected in this part of northern New York. "This spring VERY early (april), [*sic*] the geese started to slowly lay a nest of eggs," another friend, a local homesteader, remarked in a post about her flock. In one of the local/regional foodways-focused Facebook groups that I follow, "Gardening in Northern New York," a group member stands in the middle of a patch of corn. Playing on the adage—oft-repeated in the North Country among other regions—that corn should be "knee-high by the Fourth of July," she stands with her arms spread out, noting, "Corn waist-high on the fourth of July." A quick search, in fact, shows many a Facebook post—often with a #knee-highbythefourthofjuly tag—from a variety of regions, with folks from home gardeners to market farm owners to a boasting politician, standing amid their (or a local farm's) corn, with it up to their waists, shoulders, or well above their heads, and expressing a dry



Sara Lynch harvests elderflowers on the Munter Trail in Potsdam, New York, to make elderflower cordial. *All photos by the author unless otherwise noted.*

comment, or a proud exclamation, pointing out that the corn seems to be doing all right so far this year.

These sorts of comments have caught my eye on social media over and over again this year, mainly in two mostly regional Facebook Groups I follow, "North American Foragers" and the abovementioned "Gardening in Northern New York." These two groups happen to be the ones I engage with most, and Facebook Groups are more structured to support active discussion than other platforms' features tend to be. Even if they convey a bit of sense of community and continuity, however, browsing around reveals such comments on other platforms as well. I have been noting them from the beginning of the erratic 2024 sugaring season, through the early spring foraging season, and well into the garden and farm growing season in mid-July, from when I share these observations.

I have noticed them in relation to seasonal signs and activities, from forageable wild leeks and mushrooms popping up, to the fleeting appearance of the wildflowers called "spring ephemerals," to the hatching of monarch butterflies, to the progress of vegetables and herbs in cultivated gardens. Comments come from individuals I'm connected to directly, and they also appear frequently in the sorts of Facebook group conversations mentioned above, whether locally/regionally-based, or not attached to a specific location but including threads of focus on foraging and/or gardening.

There can be many reasons for variation year to year with how seasonal signals appear or crops grow, from the impact of an unexpected frost, to a broader climate pattern, as observed in an El Niño year, to the complex interactions between temperature and precipitation that can impact different species in many different ways, peculiar to their needs and traits. An individual's sense of the timing of happenings year to year can also be unreliable. These sorts of explanations are also commonly explored in online discussions around the comments that I've noticed. Nonetheless, a clear and substantial trend of posts has emerged this year, in which people note, in one way or another, that we seem to be ahead of the game.

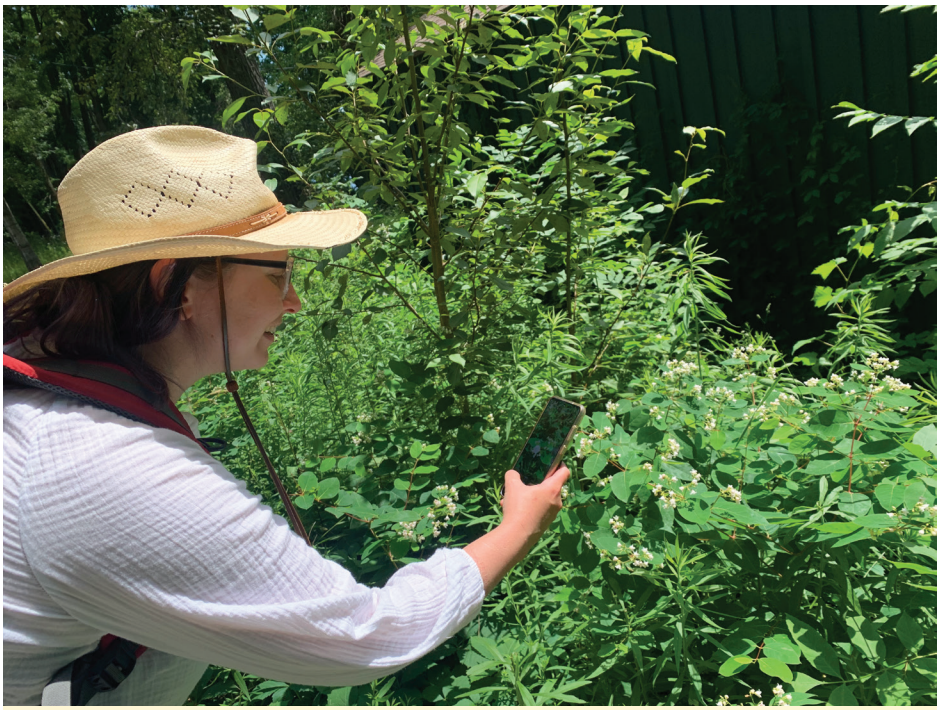
These social media sentiments stand out to me for two reasons. First, they register the fact that people attuned to the growth of both wild and cultivated food plants perceive a shift in the climate, or, as climate change is not a framework that all the commenters align with, at least a clear sense that this year's spring season is progressing faster than expected. It isn't just that folks want to note that birds are birding and sprouts are sprouting, which they also do, but that these things are occurring *earlier* than expected.

Secondly, and more to the point for the purposes of this discussion, these comments stand out to me because they exemplify the intentional and/or incidental use of digital media and Facebook, in particular, to record and share phenological details in a public forum where users expect to communicate with others who share related interests and knowledge. Phenology is generally understood to be the study—including observation and recording—of seasonal and cyclical natural phenomena, particularly, in relation to plant and animal life, climate, and seasonal weather. Over recent years of working more closely with local and regional farmers, food producers, and others who work at the intersection between foodways and the natural environment, I've increasingly seen phenology as also including the observation of cyclical and seasonal phenomena in relation to individual and community practices, along with other experiences, around food foraging, propagation, and cultivation. As with other aspects of phenology, foodways-related phenology can occur both in formal "scientific" contexts and in "folk" or "lay" contexts. While phenology itself is nothing new, whether foodways-related or otherwise, its digital valences are, of course, newer. This relatively recent phenomenon of what I like to call "digital phenology" raises many questions about how we, as individuals and communities, are currently using digital and social media, among other digital tools, to record and share phenological observations, and more particularly, how digital phenology interacts with our foodways traditions.

While fully addressing these questions would be beyond the scope of this discussion, I will begin to approach them here by briefly considering how we might contextualize digital phenology in relation to foodways. I will further explore how expressions of and engagement with digital phenology, including foodways-focused knowledge and practice, may both complicate socially constructed distinctions between "lay"/"folk" and "professional"/"scientific" knowledge and constitute an important way of expressing Local, Traditional, and/or Indigenous Ecological Knowledge. Along the way, I will examine how such implications arise from the integration of digital phenology with foraging practices, by way of sharing highlights from a recent conversation with local forager, artist, and electrical engineer-in-training Sara Lynch, whose foraging practices I first became aware of when I saw her posts in the "North American Foragers" group, as noted previously here.

Digital Phenology, Foodways, and Traditional, Indigenous, and Local Knowledge

There is a long-standing association between phenology and traditional foodways. Arguably, all phenology is connected to foodways, in that whether hunting, fishing, foraging, propagating, and/or cultivating food, all food based in the landscape is inextricably connected to natural processes, ecological conditions, and seasonal cycles—whether or not they are explicitly and obviously food-related. Also, people involved in procuring and/or growing food have long had to be attuned to such natural cycles and phenomena and have been among those who have commonly recorded and shared their observations of such things, whether for their own reference and enjoyment, or to communicate and consult with their communities, or to note such details for posterity. As Helfried Sheifinger and Barbara Templ (2016, 533) noted in an exploration of how digital tools might help bolster faltering paper-based citizen science endeavors, "Members of the public have long…recorded



Sara Lynch uses a Plant ID app to help identify an inedible flower she noticed in an unexpected place along the trail.

observations about nature. Farmers, hunters, and amateur naturalists often kept records of phenological events. Grape harvest dates, for instance, were recorded in Austria since the sixteenth century at monasteries, and court diarists noted the flowering dates of cherry blossoms in Japan for over 1200 years." These are just a couple of examples easily recognized as "data" by contemporary scientists.

In our current moment, professional scientists show increasing interest in the value of "lay people's" phenological records to track, for instance, changes in biodiversity and climate. Certain examples stand out, including arguments for more scientific attention to phenological records made by farmers and naturalists, from otherwise overlooked homemakers to the occasional star phenologist, such as Henry David Thoreau, with his complexly detailed observations of plant and animal life in the environment around him (Witherell 2008). There are also extensive "citizen science" projects, such as the Great Backyard Bird Count, launched by the National Audubon Society and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in 1998 (Cornell Ornithology Lab and National Audubon Society 2025), among many others, understood as offering useful data crowdsourced from spontaneous or recruited participants.

It seems like a positive development that such mainstream appreciation is on the rise, especially following a long lull in which rising fields of "professional" science, in the act of defining themselves, contributed to dismissing the existing phenological knowledge, and related skills and practices, of countless people as invalid. However, Thoreau aside, the world has long been full of less well-known individuals and communities, whose every meal depended on their close observation of and interaction with (and sometimes even active cultivation *of*) natural cycles—day to day, year to year, and in the case of many Indigenous and other deep-rooted communities, generation to generation.

As the people who have long been observing and maintaining phenological data have well known, this knowledge is important for many reasons, including the fact that it is integral to the knowledge of how to find and grow food, and therefore, how to survive in and with our environment. Being able to recognize the signs of seasonal change and how one seasonal happening relates to another is critical to knowing where and when to go foraging—for instance, for spring greens, mushrooms, or other wild edibles. Or how and where to find animals who depend on certain plants in the landscape. Or when to plant seeds. Or how to manage a garden, once it's growing. This kind of knowledge helps people supplement or grow their food throughout a given season. And as people often share this kind of information, making it durably recallable in some way, it also helps them and their communities to prepare for the following year, by knowing what to anticipate around when. Or, it can help people to understand the vagaries of a current season better by considering how things went in past years, as they try to untangle the threads of what is happening, why, and what they might do about it, if needed. Or, as in the case of people consciously responding to the dynamics of climate change, this kind of information can help us to see how patterns are shifting—or revealing themselves as patterns in the first place—over time.

Many in the general public may be more familiar with the practice of "citizen science," which often involves professional scientists inviting the public to participate in the organized gathering and recording of phenological data. I have been contemplating over this past season, however, while watching local farmers, gardeners, and foragers document and share their observations of seasonal happenings online, how common phenological observation and communication is a part of people's day-to-day foodways practices. And further, I've been seeing how phenology can be thought of as a critical dimension of what folklorists, among others, call Local, Indigenous, and/or Traditional Ecological Knowledge. These kinds of knowledge are deeply valuable on their own varied terms, as aspects of intertwined cultural and food sovereignty, and as vast areas of cultural richness. Important and robust as it is, though, such knowledge is too often devalued, if it is even recognized in the first place.

If we're looking, however, we can find foodways and phenology-related knowledge expressed in many forms, from oral traditions encoding and continuously perpetuating such knowledge through speech performance, songs, and ceremonies; to 19th-century (or

earlier) farmers' journals handed down through a family or accessioned in archives; to the day-to-day self-expression and outreach of current home gardeners, market farmers, and foragers on their social media pages. It's the latter kind of expression that I focus on for the rest of this discussion, diving into stories, thoughts, and experiences shared on my recent visit with Sara Lynch. With the above musings in mind, we're going to step out for a minute to go on a foraging walk with Sara, learning about the digital dimensions, as well as other aspects of her experience as a forager in the area.

An Elderflower Walk with Sara Lynch

I met up with Sara on a bright, steamy day in late June, on a trail that winds alongside the Raquette River in Potsdam, New York. Sara regularly forages throughout the season for wild edibles, from mushrooms to milkweed, among others. On this particular day, she's on the lookout for elderflowers, which she will use to make a cordial by fermenting them lightly in sugar water with lemon and strawberries. The elderflowers "add wild yeast, and this sort of floral undertone, and it's delicious!" Sometimes she'll just make an elderflower cordial and keep it in her fridge over the year, enjoying it on its own, or using it in place of lemon juice for the layer of fragrant flavor it adds. But, first, she'll need to find this year's batch of elderflowers.

We walk to a wooden platform that leads out over the river, and in a blink, Sara is leaning over the railing into the dense waterside vegetation, reaching up to snip the airy white crowns of flowers from the elderberry shrub growing alongside the path. I had asked her about her background in foraging, and how she sees digital media and other digital engagement being intertwined with it. As she harvests, she explains,

> "I've been foraging since I was a kid, but more seriously starting in the pandemic; I started to actually track everything that I picked, and I did it through photos. I would take photos, and then at the end of the year, I would go through and write down when things came up. I definitely use a lot of social media to figure out when things are coming and where."

By the time the pandemic came along, Sara already had a fair bit of foraging background to build upon. From the Potsdam area herself, her parents moved here in the 1970s from Boulder, Colorado, bringing with them interests in outdoor activities and engaging with the land, from their experience living in a housing cooperative and otherwise. Growing up in the North Country, Sara would go on hikes with her family, learning to chew on wintergreen leaves and keep an eye out for edible berries along the way.

As she notes,

> I feel like everyone in this region knows to eat blackcaps and things of that nature, and not to eat the honeysuckle berries… Kids seem to call those snake berries. So [I was] always eating berries that grew in my friends' yards and things like that.

Her interest in foraging intensified a bit more over time, as the edible landscape became more central to her needs and interests. She recalled,

> When I was in my late 20s, I didn't have a lot of money, but I like to cook nice foods….One day my mom's dog ran away, and I went to go catch him, and he was standing in a patch of fiddleheads, which I really like and are not cheap!... And I was walking him a couple days later, and this yard, where they'd cut down a tree that I'd been rather fond of, was covered with morels. [I thought,] I'm going to have a really good dinner tonight! So I sort of got into it that way….I wonder how common that is. The cost is time and knowledge, and I like to spend my time doing that, so it works.

As her early exposure to foraging came together with this newfound motivation and interest, it became a more regular practice that would jump to a new level—for her, as well as many others with related interests—when the challenges of the pandemic simultaneously encouraged more outdoor time and more online engagement.

Foraging, along with gardening, farming, and other landscape-based food procuring activities, is notable for being both deeply rooted in the analog, material world and suited to digital mediation and engagement. "It's an interesting concept," Sara commented, "because before we farmed, we foraged, so it's probably one of the oldest human activities." At first glance, foraging and Facebook might, therefore, be imagined to be pretty far apart on a spectrum of traditionality, but the persistence of foraging as a human activity over such a long time span and through so many shifts in cultural life might, in itself, help to make sense of how it has flourished, in fact, right through into the digital age. Indeed, to even intertwine with it, like the delicate but powerful tendrils of the wild grapevines twisting throughout the dense vegetation along the path we're walking. Sara snaps off a few tips of the green–purple strands uncurling toward us at eye level, as we make our way down the trail. "These wild grapes… they can strangle the trees, but the tendrils make a tasty little snack!"

As for how foraging practices and digital life may be currently enmeshed, there are a number of examples from Sara's approach and experience, which give insight into that world of possibility. For instance, our conversation brought into relief the ways digital engagement around foodways can include the practice—both intentional and incidental—of digital phenology. To explore them a bit further, we'll zoom out from our foraging walk for a moment to trace some digital aspects of the broader arc of a foray like this, from the preparation beforehand, to the day of, to the follow-up in days, weeks, and months afterward.

Getting ready for a day of foraging involves a number of steps. Sara treats her clothes with permethrin to avoid tick bites and gathers materials she considers "pretty standard: backpack, scissors, bags, knife," disinfectant wipes for field-treating poison ivy exposure, and "lots of water," as one doesn't want to be miles out on a foraging walk and need to turn back because of thirst. There are many spots she regularly returns to for foraging, some in places she wouldn't necessarily

get to otherwise, so preparations also include planning locations and figuring out if there are other activities and errands she might be able to do in the area where she's heading. She'll tailor her preparations, also, if her destination might include a swimming hole, or if she's going to kayak to the foraging spot.

Along with these hands-on steps, there are broader and deeper layers of preparation that help anchor all the rest. One way or another, before picking something, and certainly before eating it, Sara makes sure to learn a lot about it. She's jumped at opportunities for direct interaction with other knowledgeable people within and beyond the community, through in-person classes, plant ID walks, completing a permaculture design program, and by reading lots of related books and cookbooks. However, with foraging being popular in some ways, but not exactly pervasive as a local practice, Sara, like many others, has found digital tools offer a vital way to learn from and connect with others, who share related interests, experience, and next-level knowledge. For some, this kind of digital community can be a lifeline, and it is, at the very least, an option many depend on for finding resources and connections, which may not otherwise be accessible in one's local in-person community. Sara has, like many others, also learned a great deal through a variety of online sources, such as in-depth blogs by foragers and chefs, online classes, and social media platforms—including Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit—where experienced foragers, chefs, and others post about and discuss their own activities. These digital outlets can offer both information and, in some cases, a kind of community.

Sara notes that, in terms of digital tools, plant ID apps are also helpful but not enough to rely on for safe foraging. She says,

> The really tricky ones are mushrooms. Plants can kill you, too, but mushrooms have this reputation of being terrifying, and there's definitely some of that—really good edible species, but they have poisonous look-alikes. But there's the same with plants, too, we just don't think about it as much. To learn mushrooms, I would post in a couple different mushroom identification groups, and there's mycologists in those groups, so they would help me identify. And you learn how to look at them, because there are different parts of mushrooms.

She learned a lot from a guide that circulates, showing how to photograph from underneath the mushroom, a profile view, a view of it sliced in half, and noting what it's growing on, how it smells, and more. Great as they are, such learning tools are most helpful if used thoughtfully over time, rather than Googled on the spot—if the cell reception happens to be good enough in the deep woods, when one is about to sample something that they *think* might be safe and tasty. Sara has, therefore, made good use of a range of resources to learn more deeply about something as part of her longer-term, general preparations, well before foraging for it to consume.

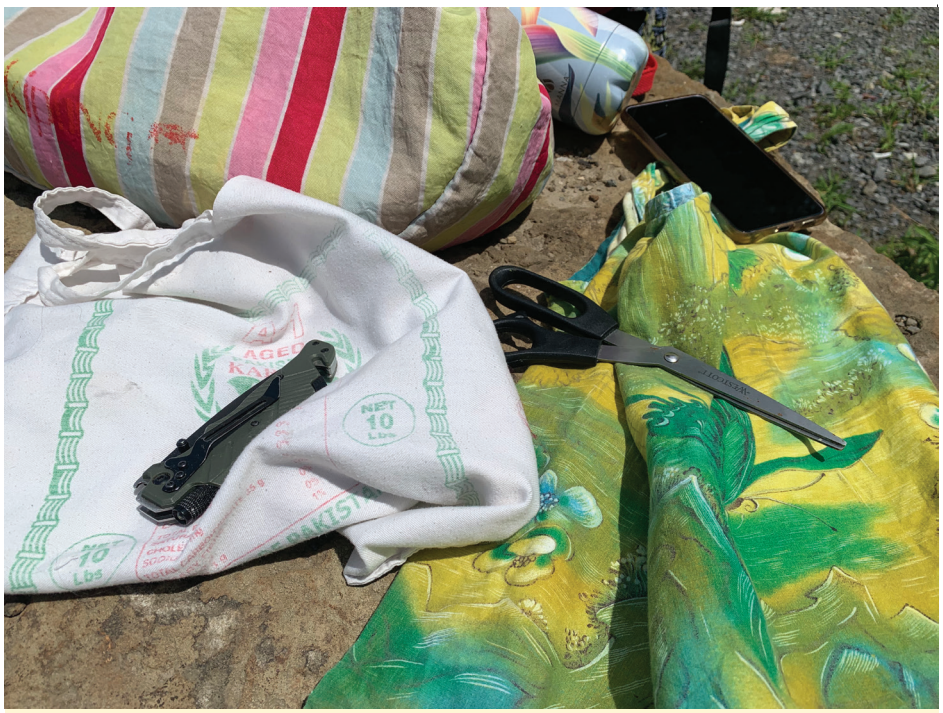
Digital sources bolster her general base of knowledge, and they also contribute a more specifically phenological dimension, in that driven as they are by the appeal of novelty and timeliness, they're often keyed to the season. So, in doing research and otherwise keeping an eye on online resources as she's gearing up to forage for a particular mushroom or plant, the digital layer of resources often throws out a kind of digital phenological set of signals. For instance, Sara gets important cues from posts about the particular things coming into season, whether in a foraging chef's deep dive in a blog post about an ingredient they've foraged—along with its cultural and ecological significance, and suggestions for how to prepare it—or in a community member's Facebook Group post about a type of mushroom or plant they've just found and what they're thinking about making with it.

People tend to post these things just as particular plant varieties come into season or are about to, as it suits both the algorithm and the common sense and interests of those posting and their audience alike. Once wild leeks, also known as ramps, are popping up in the woods in their pungent clusters, their thrilling early green glowing amid the shadowy leaf litter of winter giving way, so, too, do the wild leek posts start popping up in Facebook Groups. A pleasant barrage of posts, reels, and blogs from common folk and influencers alike not only share snapshots of their finds, but document their preservation and preparation methods. Ramp butter! Garlic scape pesto! Hosta shoot omelets! Ferment them, freeze them, dehydrate them, or just make a bunch of soup immediately. Quick clips might be assembled to show the process start to finish, or there might be a triumphant single image of the outcome, or a self-deprecating snapshot of a kitchen fail, along with a plea for suggestions about what might work better next time. Whatever the specifics, both the plant and the digital expressions of its potential have their season.

These flushes of digital expression are themselves phenological in nature, in that they give not only general inspiration but also timely practical reference information about whatever is becoming available in the landscape at that time—either right nearby if from a locally based source, or to be popping up in a week or more if the source is, for instance, from further south in the state or elsewhere in the country. Sara notes,

> With mushrooms, it's really interesting to be in a statewide group, because you can see how things start to come up, and it moves up the state…. Everybody wants morels. There's a national map, and people mark when [it's time to find them]. And you can see it. It moves up the country as the season progresses.

These sorts of maps exist for many seasonal happenings, often having a phenological bent, whether sponsored by scientific organizations, as part of a citizen science project to bolster their data, or posted by community experts and/or hobbyists out of their own desire to connect with others in sharing information about subjects from hummingbird migration to first and last sugar runs during maple season. Foragers are already accustomed to looking for phenological signs—for instance, registering the sequence of mushroom and plant availability and knowing that since they have just been foraging one kind, the next should be popping up before too long. Digital sources like this—from individual posts of a basket full and a "First morels today!" note to crowdsourced online maps—add a digital layer to



Sara's foraging pack generally includes tools like scissors, a knife, and her phone, as well as bug repellent and water.

the phenological cues. In effect, these digital expressions themselves have become one of the cyclical, seasonal signs alerting foragers to the progression of the foraging season.

Of course, even so, it's not exactly that simple. Just as a date on a calendar, or even a natural sign like particular birds or butterflies appearing, is no guarantee of how all other natural life in the season will play out, anticipating the specific arrival of the next wild edible is something of an art. As Sara points out, she might see a post about a plant or mushroom she forages from someone in the "Finger Lakes, [or] Hudson Valley—then I've got a couple weeks, ideally. Hopefully. Maybe. But maybe not….Sometimes, things just happen at weird times that we don't really understand." She explains that this is, in part, because of the sheer complexity of factors. Though one can observe signs that spring is arriving and everything is warming up, a freak storm can knock out the expected berries and blooms. "And mushrooms have a lot to do with…the water table and rain, so I would say mushroom people, in particular, are very keenly aware of how much rain has happened and when, and how that's influencing things." While this might complicate any idea of a clockwork timeline, it only adds to the ways that foragers may glean what they can from digital, as well as environmental, signs to get a sense of what to expect and when. If they've noticed a lot of rain, and they've also noticed others in a Facebook Group, or even an Instagram foraging influencer in a comparable region, noting how wet the spring has been—or if there's been a late ice storm or frost in their area—these details add to the rich fabric of phenological information and communication that inform their expectations and practices.

And, of course, Sara has her own digitally based phenological records to check, as well as any similar information that others have posted publicly in previous years. As we walk along, looking for this year's sproutlings, she describes in more detail her practice of taking photos throughout the season on her phone, creating a rich, visual phenological record that gets automatically backed up to the digital Cloud. "So at the end of the year or in January I can go through all my photos from the year and write down [that] I found this particular thing at this location at this time of year." She can then use these lists for both general reference and specific planning. Or, for instance, when she sees people noting in Facebook Groups that particular things seem to be coming up early this year, she is able to refer to her notes to see if that sense is accurate.

She notes, laughing, "I also look at my Facebook Memories. And I post fairly regularly to share, just 'cause they're nice pictures, but also for myself to go back through. Which I have mixed feelings about…but so far, it's worked fairly well for me." I've heard this sort of comment from local farmers as well—and with a similar note of mild chagrin in light of what many consider our somewhat problematic relationship, at least, with the role of digital media in our lives. Seeing their own Facebook Memories or scrolling back through reels from about the same time last year, as a reference, can help them remember what they were seeding, harvesting, or selling when, and how that compares to the current season, possibly cueing them to prepare one thing or another. Even if they keep other records, and even if there's a general sense that somehow analog documentation is more legitimate or virtuous, using these digital tools can often be the quickest, easiest way to check on the previous year's specifics. And although a variety of digital platforms have the capacity to register and disseminate phenological information, the "Facebook Memories"-type of feature that Sara refers to is suited particularly to phenological awareness, in that it reinforces the idea of cyclical phenomena. Google Photos operates similarly, with its suggested nostalgia machine running full force at all times, popping up photos and slideshows pulled from the photos taken on a specific day or at about the same time over one or more years.

Certainly, there are foragers who use none of these tools, and Sara mentions that some of the experienced folks she's heard of in the area are notably not online. However, quite a range of practitioners post phenological information related to foraging and growing food. These might include newbies asking for a group to help confirm IDs of common foraged items they've found popping up or internationally known influencers. One of Sara's frequent inspirations, Alexis Nikole Nelson—or, as she goes by online, "BlackForager"—makes a point of foraging as a way of engaging and expressing her connection to

multigenerational African-American foraging and foodways traditions. There are also Indigenous traditional community leaders—like the late Terrylynn Brant, a Haudenosaunee Mohawk seedkeeper and operator of the Mohawk Seedkeeper Gardens at Six Nations—who use social media to register culturally significant phenological observations.

Although some might be tempted to imagine those who refrain from engaging with social media as somehow more "authentic," it seems that depth of knowledge and skill, and rootedness of foodways, may or may not correlate with digital engagement. I believe it has always been the case that tradition-bearers continue over time to incorporate tools, technologies, and platforms available to them. Digital expressions, whether through individual accounts, Facebook Groups, or Tik Tok reels, are no exception. Engagement with such tools by nonexperts also defies clear definitions of what is and isn't "traditional" learning. Those who wish to learn more, whether born into a tradition or coming to a practice later in their experience, often move easily between digital and non-digital sources and modes of connection, and each kind of engagement can feed the other.

All in all, in a variety of ways not limited to those discussed here, by the time Sara kayaks to her favored swampy spot to find chicken of the woods mushrooms or bushwacks her way to a chanterelle patch, or any other digitally inclined forager sets foot on a trail, digital phenology has infused their preparations and helped form the base of knowledge from which they operate. Once on the trail, the experience is, of course, mainly material—walking, watching, searching for that flash of yellow amid the leaf litter or spray of blossoms in the shrubbery, and once the edible treasure has been found, harvesting and packing it away to take home, if not sampled on the spot. Sara also considers it important to pick up trash as she goes, showing care in turn for the landscape that is helping sustain her.

Depending on cell service, digital tools can be handy in the moment on a foraging walk as well. We stop at one point while Sara takes a quick photo of a flower that she thinks she recognizes—not to eat, as she's pretty sure it's toxic—but didn't expect to see amid these other plants in this spot. Using plant apps can also contribute to our phenological knowledge base more broadly, in that many apps aggregate data of what is found, and where and when, into a larger record. A bit further down the trail, Sara spots a distinctive set of arrow-shaped leaves popping up out of a sandbar in a stream. She thinks these might have edible roots and be a traditionally important starch in regional Indigenous foodways. "So, I would take a picture," she says, "and look it up and learn more. And that doesn't mean I'd come back here and pick these. I probably wouldn't, because I think it's doing something in the stream as it is. But if I saw them somewhere else, and felt really confident about it, I might harvest some to try it." She will later send me a link to a post on these Wapato tubers by "Forager Chef" Alan Bergo, one of the sorts of in-depth blogs she'd mentioned, which does indeed confirm her guess about what she was looking at and share a lot more about the food's cultural importance to Indigenous communities, and how to find, harvest, and prepare it.

We make our way along the trail for a while longer, with Sara collecting some more elderflowers along the way, as well as spotting some other tasty tidbits, including examples of burdock and the tongue-numbing spicy leaves of the "prickly ash," which she notes are not actually in the ash family. "That's why common names are not that helpful, but they're easy to say!" These leaves, which are related to Szechuan pepper and can be used in the same way ("Now my tongue is buzzing!"), and the young stalks of burdock plant, often considered a pesky weed in gardens and yards around the area, but having a long tradition of use in Asian cooking traditions, are among the forageable foods that have a special place in Sara's heart. Though her biological heritage lies geographically elsewhere, her mother grew up in Southeast Asia, and Sara grew up eating a lot of dishes from related cuisines. Growing up vegetarian, she'd get fresh tofu from Purple Rice, the Asian grocery market in town, and make stir-fries with milkweed tops and burdock stalks, connecting with the proprietor, another forager, over the delight in finding things regionally in season, tied to Asian cuisines.

And the thought of connecting with others over foraged foods takes us beyond the day's walk to the steps Sara will take afterwards. First, she'll need to bring her haul home and clean it. "So, then I often sit on my porch and do a lot of bug removal," she says, "and the neighbors come by and they're like *what* are you doing?" Persisting through the friendly perplexity of passersby, however, she moves on to the preserving stage. As she points out, "Foraging is really food prep, and if you want to extend the use of what you picked, it's food preservation." Preservation is no small undertaking. After delightedly noting an Instagram post about the poster's Korean parents having an entire fridge just for kimchi, she exclaims, "I need a fermented stuff fridge!"

Meanwhile, she gets by with the space she has, doing a lot of fermentation, in particular—with everything from Dryad's Saddle mushrooms to the two-year-fermented honey garlic in her fridge that just gets better every year—as well as freezing and experimenting with dehydrating. As in the process of preparing to forage, the preservation and preparation of foraged foods are also heavily informed by online sources, along with print cookbooks, which she pores over, continually learns from, and finds great joy in perusing.

And then, as she notes, "the final thing is sharing it with people!" And share she does, bringing her wild leek/ramp salt, for instance, to a handmade goods swap that littleGrasse Community Farm in Canton, New York, has made a tradition over the last several years. The ramp salt was a huge hit. Or taking her Black Locust flower cordial to a party, or baking a spectacular foraged nettle spanakopita, ornamented with fiddleheads, for a retirement celebration.

These dishes, often inspired by online sources, she might document and post also, contributing in turn to the online record that serves as both a general expression of foraged foodways and register of the delectable, fizzy, fragrant, community-building side of the year's phenological foraging patterns.

All along the way, Sara and others regularly document their experiences and

An exciting find along the trail: Sara notices the distinctive leaves of a plant she thinks she recognizes that is connected to regional Indigenous foodways. She doesn't harvest any, but looks forward to following up with research to learn more about the plant and its significance.

post about them, as well as respond to others likewise posting in "North American Foragers," "Gardening in Northern New York," and many other foraging, gardening, and foodways-focused Facebook Groups. By engaging with these groups and other platforms, she and others not only register their foraging experiences and learnings for themselves, but alert others to what's growing and what they might do with it, in the process of connecting and building community with like-minded folks more generally, whether locally or beyond. Whether because of intensity of interest or depth of knowledge, the option to find others with similar interests and even create new groups, with rules tailored to particular areas of interest or degrees of skill and experience—whether across town or in another region, depending on the group—can be a great opportunity both for learning more, whatever one's current level of knowledge, and just for enjoying communicating with others who share the interest—or even, as Sara points out, taking the opportunity, if needed, to "create the community you want."

Of course, some aren't looking to exchange this sort of information and experience. As Sara says,

> There are probably tons of people who record stuff but don't share it. There's a different subset of people who [feel that] information should be available, and I want more people to know. I think it's a positive. As long as people learn to not overharvest an area and be mindful…. And to even have access to a green space with wild stuff that's safe to eat is another aspect, too. As long as there's conversation about that, then I think more people should learn. I think it's a good way to interact with the environment and have a good relationship with it.

And further, when connecting with others online around phenology or other aspects of foraging and foodways, concerns can arise, from people tossing out ill-informed, actually dangerous identifications of plant or mushroom varieties that could, in fact, be toxic, to the now classic trap of the toxic comment section. Online discussions around foraging can provide a great opportunity to express and learn about the fraught, often painful cultural histories around different people's experience of access to public space. They can offer much needed understanding and connection around such topics, but the discussions can also lead to anger, disrespect, and dismissal from participants, who would like to imagine that there is no political dimension to foraging or other

foodways practices. And aside from the fact that, as Sara notes, "you know, you could die," if you eat the wrong foraged thing, online platforms can also just tend toward instability. "I have a lot of mixed feelings about…online community," she says. "I dislike the statement that online community isn't community. That's not true. But also, they're very volatile in ways, and they can go really badly." As she describes, among other problems, the communities can change very quickly. The fast pace of communication means that people can sometimes be put in group leadership positions that they might not even be aware of and for which they don't have the needed experience or skills. And, there is also always the question of reliability. Though a posted snapshot can be an absolutely accurate indication of the arrival of a plant or seasonal sign in the landscape, it is removed enough from one's own direct observation and any possibility of full vetting, that all must be taken with a grain (tasty as it may be) of ramp salt.

Nevertheless, digital resources and platforms add to the tapestry of possibility in how we engage with foraging, among other foodways, from alerting us to phenological information to providing an outlet to note and share information ourselves, thus contributing to the larger body of societal and cultural knowledge around the relationships between our foodways and the natural environment. And digital phenology, in particular, stands out as a dimension of this kind of engagement, whether folks document and digitally express such details with the intention of recording important patterns and phenomena to interpret and reference, or simply as an outlet for noting the observations, interests, and joys of day-to-day life, grounded in the ground around us.

"The final thing is sharing it…"

As Sara and I part ways, I continue down the path with much to think about, including whether to have a go at making some foraged flower cordial myself. The answer to that one, obviously, is yes. Another question pulling at me, though, is: why do the details about foraging and phenology that have come up in our conversation, and the trend of Facebook comments that prompted me to reach out to Sara initially, seem so vital to me? Although it's a subject I wish to explore further beyond the bounds of this discussion, for now, our conversation has only further reinforced the reasons that the trend of comments stood out to me in the first place.

Recognition of phenological specifics do indeed help us see patterns. From Sara being able to check her list of first appearance dates from last year, to the steady sprinkling of "that seems early!" comments in Facebook groups and elsewhere, digital tools help us see, record, and share information about how our seasons are changing. Local farmer Kia Beth Bennett, whom I spoke with for an earlier piece about their work at their farm Bittersweet-Milkweed Collaborative in DePeyster, New York, posted earlier this spring, along with a photo, some notes for the season so far:

> Phenology is one of the most important things we do here. I keep track of bird returns, ice flows, budding, lambing, and all other climate and ecosystem related activities in the Stella Natura Biodynamic Calendar….We're able to track changes and understand how the nonhuman neighbors are faring. #climatecrisis #phenology #citizenscience #queerfarming #earthlove #wakeup.

For Kia, among others, tracking phenology is a way to actively, consciously participate in understanding and responding to the climate crisis and challenges of sustainability. Kia not only records such information but also devotes substantial energy to crafting their work on the farm to support biodiversity and environmental resilience, to do whatever they can, in their corner of the world, to help those phenological observations signal more resilience wherever possible year to year, on their farm and beyond. And one of the remarkable features of digital technology is that, whether people noting phenological information do so with such motivations or not—and whether or not we like it that our data is there for the mining—it is potentially important information, and its availability can help those so inclined to use it to better understand and respond to the challenges we face.

Further, while the term "phenology" is useful in pinpointing a specific and important type of information, its scientific ring might belie another way that the widespread practice of digital phenology deserves more recognition: that is, as an expression of Traditional, Indigenous, and Local Knowledge.

In the essay "Time as Kinship," Indigenous philosopher and environmental justice scholar Kyle Powys Whyte (2021) discusses the idea that we should think about time in terms of relationships, rather than linear progression. He suggests, "when people relate to climate change through *linear time*—that is, as a ticking clock—they feel peril and seek ways to stop the worst impacts of climate change immediately. Yet swift action obscures their responsibilities to others who risk being harmed by the solutions" (Whyte 2021, 39). Whyte explores alternative ways of thinking, wherein climate change is not so much tracked in terms of how degradation is accelerating minute by minute, but instead "according to shifts in kinship relationships," and particularly, those "grounded in responsibility," meaning "bonds of mutual caretaking and mutual guardianship" (Whyte 2021, 42). These kinship relationships might include how one nonhuman relation, like a kind of plant, thrives differently, depending on how another nonhuman relation, such as an animal who relies on that plant for sustenance, is faring. Or they might include how we relate to and care for our nonhuman kin, including plants, animals, and mushrooms that we ourselves might rely on for sustenance and to whom we have, in turn, the responsibility to give support and stewardship.

Although Whyte explores primarily how these different orientations express and encourage different formulations of time, and by extension action, in relation to the climate, he also brings out the ways that Indigenous frameworks prioritize an understanding of time and experience based on awareness of the relationships between natural—and related cultural—happenings in time (Whyte 2021). To my mind, this includes the kind of awareness of the relations between natural phenomena studied and described by what we might otherwise

call phenology. And, in turn, that means a focus on phenology is a focus on the ways that we observe and take part in the relationships between seasonal and cyclical happenings, with such understandings informing our practices, as individuals and as communities. In other words, as our traditional foodways—Indigenous or otherwise—so often depend upon awareness of and interaction with such cyclical and seasonal happenings among our nonhuman relations, our observations of phenology are integral to our participation in the kinships that constitute time and the climate. Appreciating people's observation of and communication about phenology is a way of recognizing the kind of deep, complex, and often culturally rooted knowledge and skill that is an essential dimension of Traditional, Indigenous, and Local Knowledge. Phenology and folklife are intertwined, whether we think about them in the same terms or not, at any given moment, and folk phenology is essential as an expression of—and a pathway to agency in—our relationships with the ecologies we depend on and shape.

Facebook comments about morels popping up early, or about anything else for that matter, can be too easily dismissed as trivial: just words popping up and then vanishing, like the spring ephemerals they might be discussing. Heading home from my walk, though, I'm more certain than ever that dismissing them would be a mistake. If, instead, looking into the sometimes shaded depths of such online expression, we can keep our eyes open for the yellow chanterelle flash of these observations and commentaries, we might see a wealth of not only potentially significant climate data, but broad and deep expression of traditional and otherwise culturally rooted and hard-earned knowledge, skill, and practice. We might find a richer potential for the appreciation of—and a valuable set of tools for navigating—the kind of sight, knowledge, kinship, and connection that can help us better understand the world around us and how we might caringly, ethically, effectively—and deliciously—find our way forward in it.

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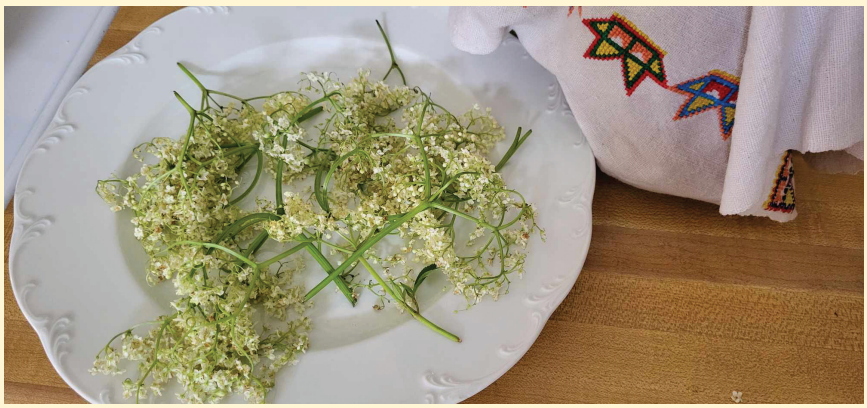

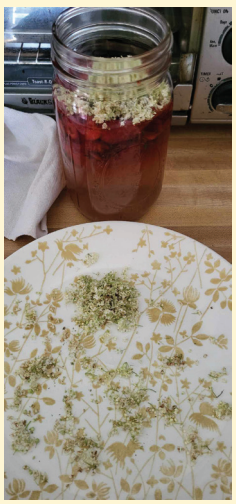

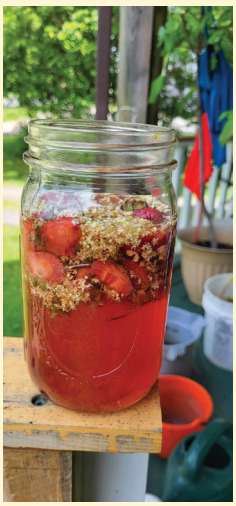

After our visit, Sara made a strawberry elderflower cordial with the flowers she'd picked on our walk. According to Marie Viljoen, in her book *Forage, Harvest, Feast: A Wild-Inspired Cuisine*, (from which Sara found the recipe she uses):"Elderflower cordial is a sacred early-summer ritual—brew it once and it lasts all year...." (Viljoen 2018, 125). *—Photos courtesy of Sara Lynch.*

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