

Non-Timber Forest Product (NTFP) Highlight: Ramps



Ramp plant – photo credit Tammi

Other common names: Wild Leeks and Wood Leeks — Latin Name: *Allium tricoccum*

Family: Amaryllidaceae (herbaceous, mainly perennial, and bulbous)



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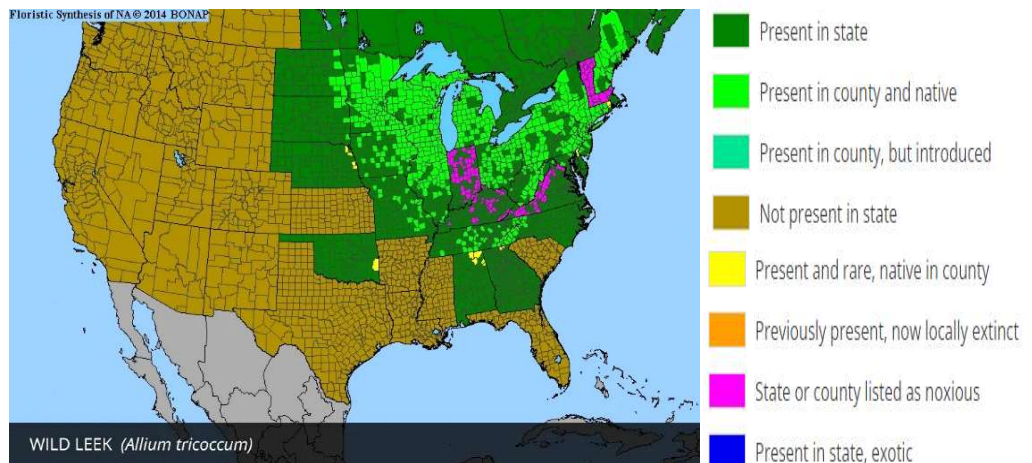
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Range:

Leeks are found throughout the northeastern portions of North America.



Description:

Ramps generally have two flat, broad leaves that grow up to a foot long that emerge from a white underground bulb, similar in appearance to a leek or green onion. The bright green leaves appear in early spring and are only visible for a few spring months before dying back. Ramps produce clusters of small white flowers at the end of long stalks during June through July which turn into small round black seeds by late summer to early fall.

Life cycle:

As with most perennial plant species, ramps have a much longer lifecycle than annuals. Ramps typically take three to seven (or more!) years to reach maturity. This is significantly longer than any garden onion or leek. Ramps emerge in early spring well before the rest of the forest plants leaf out. They spend the springtime growing, allowing them to maximize photosynthesis when more sunlight reaches the forest floor. As summer progresses, the leaves yellow and die back, leaving the flowering stalk behind. Ramps flower in late July. Before summer ends, the flowers also dry up and only the seed stalk remains. The seeds ripen through late September to early October when they start to fall to the earth around the plant and start the next generation of ramps.

Propagation:

Ramps can reproduce by both asexual (clonal or bulb division) and sexual (seeds) and therefore, can be propagated by either means. Ramp bulbs will reach a harvestable size within about three years. To plant bulbs, dig a series of trenches four to five inches deep and four to six inches apart in a prepared bed. Plant bulbs three inches deep and three inches apart within each row. Cover the entire bed with a generous two-inch layer of leaf mulch to preserve moisture and to protect the newly planted bulbs. Ramp propagation by seed takes significantly more time. Ramp seed requires exposure to both warm and cold temperatures before they germinate. Seedlings first produce roots and then grow aboveground leaves. This may occur over two summers. Visual germination of ramp seeds takes anywhere from six months (if exposed to warm temperatures in the fall) up to a full eighteen months. Plants grown from seed take seven to ten years to reach maturity. To seed ramps, pull back any leaf litter present, loosen the top one-fourth inch of the soil, and seed at a rate of seven to ten seeds per square foot. Gently press seeds into the soil and cover with two inches of leaf mulch. Seeds can be sown in flats and kept in a cold house, forested nursery beds, or planted straight into the desired area of the forest. Seeds that are started in either a nursery bed or cold house tend to have higher germination success as soil moisture is more easily maintained and potential pests can be better managed.



Wild ramps (image credit: adobe)

Pests:

Ramps have few natural pests and few diseases. Even deer tend to leave them alone. More recently, the allium leaf miner is a new and growing threat to ramp populations. It is a non-native pest that targets crops in the allium family, including garlic, onions, leeks, shallots, chives, and ramps. It is currently contained within the northeastern states but has the potential to spread through the transportation of infected plants.



Image credit: UPSRCGG

Harvest:

The whole harvest of the ramp plant (bulb and leaves) kills the plant while only cutting the leaves will not. The bulb is the most intensely tasting part of the plant and what has historically been sought after. Just cutting one of the two leaves is a more sustainable approach to enjoying the plant as it leaves the bulb intact to grow another year.

For leaf harvest – Be sure to leave at least one leaf on the plant, this means cutting only one or two, depending on the size of the ramp plant.

For whole harvest – This is considered the most aggressive harvesting method. For whole-plant harvests, target clusters of ramps and remove bulbs to help thin the patch. One approach to help improve the sustainability of whole plant harvest is the cut-stalk or snap method. This non-destructive harvesting technique involves inserting a sharp knife just below the soil and cutting the upper portion of the ramp off, leaving the bulb intact in the soil to continue growing next season.



Images from United Plant Savers Ramps Cultivation and Growing Guide

Conservation status:

Wild ramp populations are declining due to overharvesting and loss of forested habitat.

Market potential:

While less widely known in Missouri than the Appalachian region, ramps hold great market potential, especially as a specialty item at farmers markets or for high-end restaurants. Current prices range from \$15.00 to \$20.00 per pound.

References:

Filyaw, T.R., editor. 2019. The Forest Farmers Handbook: A Beginners Guide to Growing and Marketing At-Risk Forest Herbs. Rural Action.

Mulhollem, J. 2018. Researchers to study ramps' market, flavor profile, vulnerability to pest. [Internet]. Penn State; [cited 2022 Oct 18]. Available from <https://www.psu.edu>