Eating on the Wild Side
The Missing Link to Optimum Health

By Jo Robinson
Overview

A fun, very informative read, *Eating on the Wild Side* is interspersed with charming pencil and pen sketches, intriguing recipes, information-packed tables and graphs, engaging history and solid, science-based advice for healthful eating. Posing the question, “Where do the fruits and vegetables we eat come from?” Heath writer and food activist, Jo Robinson, recounts the circuitous paths from original plant progenitors to the produce available now in supermarkets, u-pick fields and farmers’ markets. Although, harvesting and exclusively eating wild plants is not possible in a modern setting, Robinson provides ample evidence that substantial health benefit can accrue from consumption of carefully selected, appropriately stored and properly prepared vegetables and fruits.

In ancient times, to ensure a more reliable, easier to obtain food supply, hunter-gathers planted seeds of wild plants near their temporary encampments. Over time temporary encampments became permanent settlements. These earliest farmers preferentially selected the seeds of plants that had characteristics which their community found pleasing. Often the selection was in favor of sweeter and milder taste, higher fat content and ease of eating.

Settlements increased in size to become larger population centers. Eventually the idea of produce year-round grew in favor. Large scale farming operations designed to keep far-off grocery stores stocked with out-of-season as well as in-season produce displaced many of the small acreage farms that had supplied mostly local markets. Harvested produce had to be stored until there was a retail need. To that end plant scientists developed plant varieties that were hardy enough for long-term, spoilage-free storage and able to survive long-distance transport. Ultra-Violet irradiation to destroy mold, ethylene gas spray to ripen on demand, premature harvesting of unripe produce and the use of gene altering techniques to quickly develop hardy strains became the norm. However, plant science research began to show that while hardiness had been achieved, nutritional content and medicinal properties intrinsic to the original, primitive plant varieties had almost always been bred out.

In the Vegetables section Robinson quotes Hippocrates, “Let food be thy medicine and medicine thy food”, to introduce a fascinating discussion of garlic, onions, shallots, scallions, leeks and chives, the alliums – “savory vegetables, essential condiments and lifesaving medicine.” The story of the transformation of highly nutritious wild greens to minimally nutritious lettuce traces vast genetic change. On the other hand, the story of a few vegetables such as garlic and kale points to
little varietal modification. Besides the shopping, storage and cooking tips in each chapter, there are tasty-sounding recipes. Armenian Lentil Soup, is one. Each chapter concludes with a table, “Recommended Varieties”, providing guidance for selecting vegetables and fruits from supermarkets or specialty vendors. At the very end of each chapter there is a summary, “Points to Remember”, a numbered list of key points from the chapter, formatted to be easy to remember.

Apples are discussed at some length in Part II (Fruits) section, perhaps because they are popular, so many varieties exist, and the progenitor of all modern apple varieties is known. Among apple varieties available today, the crabapple is the most nutritious but the least tasty! (Crabapple is a generic term for any apple that the fingers of one hand can wrap around.) Crabapple taste tends towards bitter, a characteristic of many highly nutritious vegetables and fruits.

Various people play roles in the story of edible plant products. An example, the development of Welch’s Grape Juice. Ephraim Bull was a Massachusetts plant breeder, in the 1840’s. He cross-bred some wild grape plants to create the Concord grape. It retained most of the nutrients present in the wild varieties. In 1869, Dr. Thomas Bramwell Welch, a Methodist pastor adapted pasteurization to attenuate the normal fermentation process of Concord grape juice. The result, known today as Welch’s Grape Juice, retains much of the original nutritional value of the original wild grape stock.

Majid Foulad, a present-day plant scientist at Pennsylvania State University, used gene analysis together with conventional plant breeding to create a cherry tomato variety and several larger varieties that contain almost as much lycopene as the original South American wild tomato. Robinson cites this as a hoped-for revival of flavor and nutrients as priorities over and above productivity, ease of harvest and hardiness.

**Important People**

**Jo Robinson** authored this book, published it in 2013, is a food activist and health writer. Her prior publications have all been about animal husbandry. She lives and works on Vashon Island, near Seattle, Washington.

**Andie Styner** who illustrated this book is a graphic artist affiliated with Roobiblue Studios.
Key Insights

1. Living on wild plants is not possible today but living “on the wild side” is feasible by buying, storage and preparation to enhance nutritional benefit.
2. Speaking in general, the darker the color of a vegetable or fruit, the more nutrients it contains.
3. For maximum health benefits, shop for individual vegetables and fruits in season and off the grid (u-pick operations and farmers’ markets).
4. To preserve nutrients, steaming or microwaving are usually the better cooking choices.
5. To preserve nutrients in vegetables and fruits, microwave to defrost.
6. Tearing lettuce, and allowing it to sit for about 1 hour enhances the development of antioxidant content.
7. Retain antiviral, antibacterial, ant clotting, anticancer, antioxidant properties in garlic by mincing, then setting aside 10 minutes before cooking.
8. Cavendish bananas commonly found in supermarkets are the most popular but least nutritious fruit.
9. Preserve nutrients in peaches by slicing, then freezing.
10. In general, the smaller the better when it comes to selecting tomatoes for flavor and nutrition.

Author’s Style

“Eating on the Wild Side” is divided into five parts, Introduction, Part I (Vegetables), Part II (Fruits), Acknowledgements, Scientific References and About the Author. Introduction articulates the central premise. Advancing knowledge of food science and commitment to health is the goal.

The story of each vegetable or fruit is told with affection, as if that plant were a family member with a personal story to tell. This quality, together with her use of direct, engaging prose, her intuition of a typical reader’s questions - these qualities make Living on the Wild Side eminently readable.

One of the major joys of this book is the discovery of Recommended Varieties tables at the end of each chapter. By that point in a chapter the reader has become acquainted with the pros and cons of just enough varieties of a vegetable or fruit family to be confused. These chapter-ending tables break down what would otherwise be easily forgotten also functioning as a long-term reference tool for shopping. Immediately after these tables in each chapter are the Points to
Remember – keys to all the major concepts the reader should retain. Well-executed comparison graphs placed at key points are especially welcome because they are so well-suited for clarifying value disparities.


**Author’s Perspective**

Jo Robinson, a well know food activist and author, contends that optimum health and eating enjoyment of vegetables and fruits can result by employing wise shopping, appropriate storage and employment of best practices in preparation and cooking.

Robinson encapsulates historic and anthropological detail into each plant story enhancing the reader’s experience. Scandinavians held apples in high esteem. The Egyptians valued apples to the point of placing them with their dead and the Welsh made up the ditty about an apple a day keeping the doctor away. Robinson recounts apple propagation in ancient Persia. It’s perhaps the earliest description of using grafting to create new variations. Individual vegetable or fruit chapters are subdivided into beguilingly named chapter subsets. For example, there is Genetic Bludgeoning and For Our Next Trick – Double and Triple Mutations in the chapter on corn.

**Intended Audience**

The author states that anyone who eats fruits and vegetables can benefit from reading this book. Probably deeper appreciation could be gleaned by those who have some familiarity with health-compromising medical conditions; for example, hypoglycemia, and familiarity with biochemical terminology. However, Robinson thoroughly clarifies technical terminology and concepts for the lay reader. A condition called “super-taster”, also known as “picky eater”, is explained as the combination of inherited taste buds together with lack of cultural exposure to bitter foods. Robinson provides suggestions for coping. For those people who suffer
from flatulence after eating legumes, Robinson provides insight into the cause and advice for how to minimize the likelihood that it will occur.