

Food for free

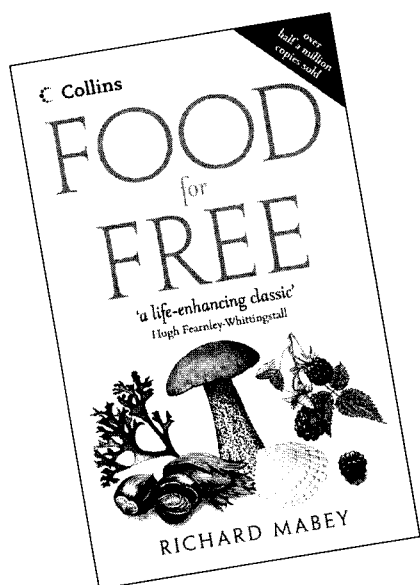
Richard Mabey, Collins, 2007, £12.99, ISBN: 978-0-00-724768-4 www.collins.co.uk

In the UK, we have a huge appetite for cheap food, the sort of stuff that is produced on an industrial scale but which frequently includes questionable ingredients. On the other hand, the free food which author Richard Mabey describes is guaranteed to be unprocessed, 100% organic and hopefully contaminated by nothing more than the occasional insect or smudge of dirt.

First published in 1972, *Food for Free* has recently been updated and reissued in paperback format. The publication helps us identify 240 wild foods, including fungi, seaweed, shellfish, roots, vegetables, herbs, flowers, fruits and nuts. Mabey stresses that we should pick responsibly, not gathering those plants that are rare and intersperses the text with recipes, historical references and anecdotes. Most of the wild foods are illustrated, although an image of a flower isn't always useful when you're hunting for the leaves of an early season plant that has yet to flower.

Those with a sweet tooth may be interested in the candies produced from wild plants in years gone by. For instance, Mabey introduces us to the original Marsh-mallow (*Althaea officinalis*), a tall perennial plant which produces soft-branched clumps of velvety pink flowers between July and September. Before marshmallows came to be manufactured out of gelatine and sugar they were produced from the roots of *Althaea officinalis*, which contain the necessary starch, sugar and gelatinous matter.

If you're the sort that likes to walk in the countryside and wants to know more about the plants around them, particularly the edible ones, this would be a fine, pocket size publication to take with you. At £12.99 it isn't cheap, but think of all the money you will save as you tuck into dock pudding, sorrel soup and simmered chickweed.



Feeding People is Easy

Colin Tudge, *Feeding People is Easy*, Italy, Paris Publishing, 2007, ISBN 978-88-901960-8-9

Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like the evil spirits at the dawn of day.

Thomas Jefferson, letter to Pierre S. du Pont de Nemours, 24 April 1816

Colin Tudge is an avowed Jeffersonian democrat. His latest book is founded on the premise that human behaviour is ultimately determined by ideas: if our facts are correct and our thinking is logical, then we can make use of our traditional crafts, guided by science, to feed every human being on the face of the earth—not just now but forever.

It's a tall order: "The title of my book exaggerates somewhat," Tudge wryly observes. His close observation of traditional farms all over the world has made him aware that our painstakingly accumulated agricultural skills are under massive attack from the global farming factories. The elements of the plot are already familiar to the point of cliché, but he weaves the threads together into a coherent pattern in which "market forces" promote greed, dissatisfaction and boredom, making them the prime incentives for destructive, ultimately sterile agricultural overproduction. Our grain has been transmuted into gold—hard food for Midas indeed!

Tudge's botanical knowledge takes him beyond the usual organic versus technological debate. Truly sustainable agriculture includes "agroforestry": "Livestock can fare particularly well under trees. Pigs, poultry and even cattle are basically forest animals. They are demonstrably happier and more productive with shade and shelter." This would not be simply a retreat into Luddism: "Willows can be continuously cropped as a source of biofuel."

Colin Tudge may not talk to plants, but they speak eloquently to him. They tell him that all over the world they are being stretched beyond their natural limits, deprived of proper nutriment and of the symbiotic relationships with other species that promote their optimal growth. And what is good for plants and animals is also good for the humans who primarily depend on them for nourishment:

What are the basic ingredients of traditional cooking all the world over? Plenty of plants, not much meat, and maximum variety.

In short, we can't lose. Farms that are designed to feed people forever... produce exactly the right foods in the right proportions as recommended by modern nutritionists; and these in turn are precisely what is required to produce the world's finest cooking... The future, indeed, belongs to the gourmet.

The final chapter outlines his plan for two vast institutions to reeducate our farmers and make their products widely available. The College for Enlightened Agriculture would collect, preserve and transmit the inherited knowledge of the world's disappearing artisanal farmers; the Worldwide Food Club, set up initially as a website, would be a global exchange mechanism to put consumers in touch with suppliers, predominantly local. Colin Tudge's ambitions may look impossibly starry-eyed, but the evidence increasingly suggests that such a radical overhaul of our food production and distribution is the only game in town.

Although his previous books give ample evidence of his science and his scholarship, a bibliography and footnotes would have been reassuring. There's not even an index; readers who wish to refer back to his closely reasoned arguments might well make their own. Nevertheless, the book is a useful and inspiring Jeremiad from a farmer-scholar who has earned the right to thump his lectern. Whether he's holding a pen or a plough—more power to his elbow!

■ John Whiting www.whitings-writings.com

Garden grabbing

Over the next ten years, garden space of around the size of 2800 Wembley pitches will disappear if the growing phenomenon of 'garden grabbing' is not stopped. Garden Organic says the definition of gardens as brownfield sites leaves them ripe for development. Housing shortages mean that property developers buy up homes with large gardens, then build a small estate of new flats on the plot.

That is just what has happened to Theo Bryer, of Brixton Hill, who told us, "We have a small garden, less than 25 feet, I love the view of a nearby tree and there are all sorts of birds and wildlife sharing our bit of green with us. But now, three houses in a row to one side have been converted into flats and the gardens have been built over or are about to be. One flat is

designated a family flat because it apparently has a garden, but there is only about 12 feet left. In such a built up area as ours, green space is at such a premium and the gardens are so small anyway. It has an impact on everyone's quality of life."

Garden Organic is not against building homes on true brownfield sites, but says this should not apply to gardens. It has succeeded in getting a Bill introduced into Parliament to change the classification of gardens and this gets its second hearing on June 15.

■ To support their 'Save our Garden' campaign check out www.gardenorganic.org.uk/saveourgardens.