
A Permanent Food Source

Edible Insects

Roman Shapla

*“You don’t have a snail problem.
You have a garlic-and-butter deficiency.”*

ONE OF MY FAVORITE THINGS about teaching permaculture to kids is that they are free from most of the social conditioning that has led to our current ecological crisis.

A few years ago, our children were exploring the garden with a friend of ours. They came running up to us brimming with excitement. They’d discovered something delicious and wished to share it with us. As we wondered what new vegetable or herb had excited their palate, they shouted in unison, “Ants!”

Our friend, who had recently returned from Central America, showed them how to place a drop of honey in the center of a mint leaf. A healthy pinch of ants (easily found in the garden) were sprinkled on top and the leaf was then folded and eaten whole. As the kids ran off in search of more ants, I remembered the time a few years ago when tens of thousands of cicadas emerged from their 13-year dormancy and completely covered trees and build-



The author’s eight-year-old daughter, Joya, feasting on a grasshopper.

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ings. The noise was absolutely deafening. People spent hours spraying, smashing, and hosing them away. In the midst of all this hysteria, two exchange students from China were calmly walking down the street, plucking cicadas to fill their bags. These young women were a living example of the principle, “The problem is the solution.” My cross-cultural curiosity aroused, I decided to sauté some for myself and found them most delectable.

This experience resurfaced shortly after we moved to the Pacific Northwest, due to the abundance of snails in our garden. One evening when setting out a saucer of beer for them, I remarked how tragic it was that perfectly good beer was being wasted. Then it hit me—why not eat them? I collected a few dozen and placed them in a mason jar with cornmeal. Next, I moved them into a new jar with a carrot (to ensure their insides were thoroughly cleansed). The result: locally wildcrafted escargot!

Of course, such culinary forays require overcoming a minor mental hurdle, but this is easy once we acknowledge our attitude toward insects is socialized into us. After all, insects are eaten in almost every country around the world, with the US (and, to a lesser extent, a few European countries) being the major exception. But our relationship with bugs has not always been this hostile. “In pre-modern times,” Wolf Storl writes in *Culture and Horticulture*, “the relationship between man and the little beasties has been one ranging from delight, to awe, to reverence, to respect.” He goes on to add, “In many instances bugs were not considered in a negative sense at all, as children’s rhymes and peasant sayings indicate. Some bugs were sacred to humanity.” They have been a regular part of the human diet since time immemorial. No doubt a large factor in non-European attitudes toward entomophagy lies in the recognition that insects are extremely nutritious. They are an excellent source of protein, vitamins (including vitamin B12), and minerals, and tend to be low in carbohydrates. Often called “mini-livestock,” insects are super-efficient at energy conversion—according to some reports, up to nine times more efficient than beef. When viewing insects as a form of catching and storing energy, the permaculture system begins to appear even more productive than originally planned. Additionally, unlike animals that are reared, insects flourish on their own accord making them one of the best ways to obtain a yield with the least amount of labor.

Out of more than 1,400 species eaten by humans, the most common are grasshoppers and crickets. Many are surprised to learn that Leviticus 11:21 encourages the consumption of these two (along with the locust and the katydid). A common argument in favor of entomophagy lies in the fact that our culture regularly

consumes lobster, crab, crawfish, and shrimp, all of which belong to the same biological group (the phylum Arthropoda) as insects. Remembering this will help integrate rather than segregate insects into our diets and ensure that we produce no waste.

Incorporating insects into our diets could be just one way of using small and slow solutions to the global food crisis. The UN has even creatively responded to change with a 2008 conference to promote the human consumption of insects.

In all honesty, one must admit that insects are already part of our diet. Sandor Katz notes, "everyone (including the strictest vegan) who has ever eaten anything has unintentionally eaten millions of insects," from contaminants in industrial production to tiny hitchhikers on your locally grown produce. There is even an FDA guideline of acceptable insect parts allowed. Perhaps it is time to use the edges of our gardens and value the marginal species. We can do this by applying self-regulation to our ethnocentric worldview and accepting feedback from indigenous cultures and young children. △

Grasshoppers
by Nanao Sakaki

Hi Fred!

You don't want to have
Vegetable garden this summer, do you?

-No, too many grasshoppers.

Why don't you eat them?

-Prairie Shrimp-!

Catch with butterfly net
Take off legs
Saute in butter
Eat with garlic and soy sauce.

Next morning
Give your shit back to the garden;
Now with numberless grasshoppers

Sing songs
Hop
Jump
Dance
Forever

January 28, 1981

Resources

1. The best place to find more information about entomophagy is the impressive Food Insects Newsletter edited by DeFoliart, Dunkel, and Gracer. It is packed with over 400 pages of traditional knowledge, modern science, recipes, nutritional comparisons, folklore, and even medicinal uses. Available from www.hollowtop.com,
2. Katz, Sandor Ellix. (2006). *The Revolution Will Not Be Micro-*

waved: Inside America's Underground Food Movements. Chelsea Green.

3. Sakaki, Nanao (1987). *Break the Mirror: The Poems of Nanao Sakaki.* North Point Press.
4. Storl, Wolf. (1979). *Culture and Horticulture: A Philosophy of Gardening.* Bio-Dynamic Literature.
5. www.food-insects.com
6. worldento.com

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*Prime appetizers of tarantula and cucumbers.
Photo by istoletv via Flickr.*