

Fiddlehead Ferns

INDIGENOUS HARVEST OF THE MONTH

Eat More Alaska Fiddlehead Ferns

Fiddleheads are the coiled edible spring grow of several different types of ferns. Their name comes from their resemblance to the scroll at the top of a violin. They can be found from the Brooks Range all the way down to the Aleutian Islands in the west, and the Alaska Panhandle in the East. Fiddlehead ferns prefer moist, shady bottomlands, woods, and streambanks.

Why Eat More Fiddlehead Ferns?

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 100 g

Amount Per Serving

Calories 34

% Daily Value

Total Fat 0.4g 1 %

Sodium 1mg 0 %

Total Carbohydrate 5.5g 2 %

Protein 4.6g 9 %

Vitamin A 72 % • Vitamin C 44 %

Calcium 3 % • Iron 7 %

Daily values are based on 2000 calorie diet.

100 grams (roughly 1 cup) of fiddlehead ferns provides:

- An excellent source of Vitamin A and Vitamin C.
- A good source of potassium. Potassium helps to maintain a healthy blood pressure.
- Fiddleheads are rich in antioxidants that help protect against disease.

Fiddleheads are eaten as a vegetable, similar to asparagus.



How Were Fiddlehead Ferns Used Traditionally?

Fiddleheads are actually the very young growth of two main types of ferns, Ostrich Ferns and Lady Ferns. If you look very closely, you can see the tiny leaves all wrapped up together. Once they unfurl into a full grown fern, they can't be eaten anymore, but later in the fall, the root of these ferns can be harvested. Traditionally, the Tlingit and Haida people roasted fiddleheads in an outdoor cooking pit, while the Dena'ina boiled them. One way to clean the brown papery scales off of the fiddleheads is to toss them back and forth in a fish trap.

This perennial plant will come back in the same location year after year, but we must be careful not to over-harvest any one plant because that will eventually kill it. Fiddleheads can usually be found near salmonberry bushes and nettles.

How to Choose, Store and Prepare Fiddlehead Ferns

Choose: Fiddleheads that are ready for harvest will have brown papery scales on the outside. **If they have a brown fuzz, they are not the edible kind of fiddlehead.** The tighter the coil, the better the taste. The adult ferns are inedible, so avoid picking fiddleheads that are unfolding.

Store: Once rinsed, fiddleheads can be stored for up to a week in the vegetable drawer of a refrigerator. For longer storage, you should blanch the fiddleheads in water for two minutes, then freeze in a plastic bag.

Prepare: The brown scales rub off very easily when they are dry. **All fiddleheads should be cooked before eating.** This could be through steaming, boiling, or baking.

Harvesting Fiddlehead Ferns

Fiddleheads should be picked in the spring while the top is tightly coiled. The tighter the coil, the less bitter the taste. You can snap off the fiddleheads with your fingers, making sure to get as much of the young stem as possible. **Be sure to avoid bracken ferns, as these are poisonous. They have fuzz instead of papery scales.** Never collect more than half the ferns from one plant, as this can eventually kill it.

Steamed Fiddlehead Ferns

- Trim and rinse one pound of fiddleheads, removing any of the brown scales or mushy parts.
- In a large pot, bring 1-inch water to a boil. Put fiddleheads in a steamer basket and place above boiling water. Cover and cook until fiddleheads are tender but still faintly crisp, about 5 minutes.
- Drain and serve hot with butter, salt, and pepper to taste.

Native Names for Fiddlehead Ferns

Sugt'stun name: Kun'aqutaq

Dena'ina Athabascan name:
Uh ts'egha

Koyukon Athabascan name:
Tlaa edenaalkkede

Yup'ik name: Cetugar

Tlingit name: K'wálx

Alutiiq name: Qataqutaq

Learning Activity

Get several cooked green vegetables (fiddleheads, asparagus, green beans, sugar snap peas) and put one of each on a plate for each student. Have them try each item and then answer the questions below:

- Describe each vegetable: taste, shape, color, texture, etc.
- Sketch each vegetable and color.
- Write what you liked best and least about each vegetable and why.
- Compare and contrast each leafy green with all the others.



For more information, visit the
Alaska Farm to School website at:

<https://www.farmtoschoolalaska.org/harvestofthemonth/>