

# Ramps

**BOTANICAL NAME:** *Allium tricoccum*

**COMMON NAMES:** Ramps, Rents, Rams, Ramson, Wild Leek, Wood Leek, Spring Onions

**NATIVE RANGE:** Hardwood forests of eastern North America, especially the Appalachian region, though also extending north to Canada and west as far as Missouri and Minnesota (Davis & Persons, 249).

**DESCRIPTION:** The ramp is a bulb-forming perennial plant in the same family as onion, chive, leek, shallot and garlic. It grows in the shade of hardwood forests, in rich, moist soil. Ramps grow from a firmly anchored bulb, about 1/2 to 1 inch wide, that grows just below the soil surface. Bulbs of mature plants will divide into multiple bulbs, eventually forming colonies around the original plant. Bulbs are bright white near the root but fade into a deep purple color on the neck. The neck in turn transitions into 1 to 3 deep green leaves, each typically 1-1/2 to 2-1/2 inches wide and 6 to 10 inches long.



Photo by Ty Wright

**LIFE CYCLE:** Ramps emerge in early spring, usually the last week of March here in central Ohio. They're easy to spot since they grow in patches and are one of the only green things in the woods at that time of year. Initially the neck of the bulb emerges through the leaf litter, then the green leaves emerge from the neck and start to unfurl. The leaves quickly grow and broaden over the next 2 to 3 weeks, taking advantage of the sun before the trees leaf out. The bulbs enlarge and become spicier as they mature. About six weeks after they emerge, as temperatures climb and the forest canopy fills in, the leaves start to bleach and desiccate and within just a few days they disappear completely.



But that doesn't mean the plant is done for the year. In late July, a single flower stalk emerges, about 6 to 8 inches tall with a small cluster of white flowers on top. At first the flowers are closed and just look like small white berries, but eventually they open into tiny flowers. Once pollinated those flowers turn into small, bright green seed pods that gradually dry and split open, usually in late September here. The seeds are shiny black, hard little spheres. Each seed head typically carries 10 to 25 seeds. Ramps grow very slowly. Once planted, seeds take from 6 to 8 years to reach a harvestable size.

**CONSERVATION CONCERNS:** Once abundant throughout Appalachia, ramps are becoming a victim of their own success in a way. Wild populations face increasing pressure from habitat loss and irresponsible over-harvesting, especially as they continue to gain popularity among chefs and restaurateurs. United Plant Savers, a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of native plants, includes ramps on their “To Watch” list. Several states, including New York, Tennessee, Maine and Rhode Island, have designated ramps as a species of concern. Always make sure your ramps are sustainably harvested.



**CULTIVATION:** Ramps grow primarily in the shade of hardwood forests and prefer rich, moist soil. Colonies are often found on the lower parts of slopes near creeks and streams, and also in moist bottomlands not subject to flooding. We prefer to plant seeds in the fall, around the same time the seeds would naturally fall to the ground. We use a very simple ‘wild-simulated’ method when we plant ramp seeds. First, we rake the leaf litter off the forest floor using a plastic leaf rake to expose the bare soil. Next we remove any unwanted rocks, roots and vines from the planting area. We then use a steel garden rake to rough up the surface of the soil. Once the area is prepped we sprinkle the seeds evenly across the planting area, using approximately one ounce of seed for a 100 square foot bed. In order to improve contact between the seeds and the soil, we walk back and forth across the beds to gently tamp the seeds

into the soil. Finally, we rake the leaf litter back over the bed. Whenever possible, we plant seeds just before a rain. Smaller quantities of seed can also be planted individually at a depth of 1/2 inch and covered with 2 to 3 inches of leaves for mulch. Bulbs can be transplanted by carefully digging and dividing a clump of ramps, then planting individual plants one foot apart at the same depth they were already growing. Make sure that the planting hole is large enough to accommodate the roots without crowding. We currently have some test plots where we trimmed the root end of some bulbs, leaving about 1/4 inch of bulb attached to the roots. We then re-planted those pieces about one inch below the surface and covered with mulch. By replanting the piece that’s typically discarded, we hope to have our ramps and eat them too. We’ll report on our results later this spring.



**CULINARY USES:** Travel through the Appalachian region in the spring and you're likely to find a ramp festival. These are often held as fundraisers for local community organizations, but some, like the Feast of the Ramson in Richwood, West Virginia, are major tourist attractions and serve many thousands of people (Davis & Persons, 249). Both ramp bulbs and leaves are delicious. Bulbs have a distinctive taste that I liken to a sweet onion mixed with a spicy garlic, but more pungent than either. The leaves have the same flavor but milder. Ramps are highly nutritious, being high in vitamin A, vitamin C, iron and selenium. Ramps were traditionally consumed as a spring tonic, providing much-needed vitamins and minerals after a winter with little or no fresh produce (Davis & Persons, 253).

Ramps pair perfectly with many foods and can be enjoyed with any meal of the day. For breakfast, ramps make a delicious accompaniment for egg dishes, bacon and sausage, and fried potatoes. Incorporating the chopped leaves into strata or frittata is a great way to add a punch of flavor and color. For dinner, try adding chopped ramps to a stir fry with shiitake mushrooms & asparagus, or to potato soup with bacon and cheddar. Their elegant shape and vivid colors make them true beauties on the plate, especially next to a nicely grilled steak or pork chop.

Fresh ramps have a very short season but there are several ways to preserve them. The leaves can be frozen or, better yet, blended with pistachios and parmesan into a downright addictive pesto that can be frozen in ice-cube trays and used later as a simple, flavor-packed addition to soups, pasta or salad dressing. Ramp bulbs can also be dehydrated and crushed (or powdered) and used just like dried onions, or maybe incorporated into biscuit mix. Ramp bulbs pickled with spices in a sweet and sour brine are delicious, and they will keep for 6 to 8 weeks in the refrigerator. Visit the Recipes page at our website [MAYAPPLEFARMS.COM](https://www.mayapplefarms.com) for more ideas on cooking with ramps.

**FOLKLORE:** Much of the lore surrounding ramps concerns their famously pungent aroma. Stories abound of school kids gorging on ramps to the point that their odor would be unbearable, and the teacher would send them home (Davis & Persons, 249). And consider the mischievous tale of Jim Comstock, publisher of the *West Virginia Hillbilly* in Richwood, West Virginia. One spring around 1962, in honor of the local ramps festival called The Feast of the Ramson, Comstock mixed ramp oil into the ink used to print the paper. Legend has it that the strong odor permeated entire postal service warehouses. Eventually the postmaster issued a stern rebuke and refused to allow the papers to pass through the U.S. Mail (Null, 2016). And even the city of Chicago is named after the ramp: "The name Chicago is derived from the local Indian word chicagoua for the native garlic plant (not onion) *Allium tricoccum*. This garlic (in French: ail sauvage) grew in abundance on the south end of Lake Michigan on the wooded banks of the extensive river system which bore the same name, chicagoua" (Swenson, 1991).

#### RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT RAMPS:

- + United Plant Savers ([HTTPS://WWW.UNITEDPLANTSAVERS.ORG/RAMPS](https://www.unitedplantsavers.org/ramps))
- + Rural Action article on cultivating ramps ([HTTP://RURALACTION.ORG/WP-CONTENT/UPLOADS/2012/07/RAMPS.PDF](http://ruralaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/RAMPS.PDF))
- + USDA plant profile for Ramps ([HTTPS://PLANTS.USDA.GOV/CORE/PROFILE?SYMBOL=ALTR3](https://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=ALTR3))

#### REFERENCES CITED IN THIS ARTICLE:

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