

FIDDLEHEADS

Latin: *Matteuccia struthiopetris*

Common name: Ostrich Ferns or Fiddleheads

MAJOR USES:

- Pickled
- Fermented
- Baked
- Roasted
- Breakfast quiches
- Soups
- Salads

Fiddleheads should have a crispy texture and can easily be overcooked if not given close attention.

Fiddleheads can last up to a week in the refrigerator, a year plus in the freezer, or when canned or dehydrated and stored properly can last around 18 months.

Fiddleheads' ability to withstand cold temperatures means they can be found throughout the *Northeast, Midwest, Canada, Europe, and northern Asia*. Ostrich Ferns are specifically found in *Eastern Woodland* areas. Fiddleheads prefer very wet soils and are usually found alongside rivers, banks, streams, and in wet woods and floodplains. These soils are typically sandy and rich in organic matter.



ROOT SYSTEM & CROWNS

Fiddleheads are deciduous perennials that have underground shoots and roots that form a system known as rhizomes. As the ground begins to thaw and the banks of the rivers start to dry up, Fiddleheads emerge from their crowns, covered in a brown papery skin. The crowns themselves resembled upside-down pinecones. The fiddleheads grow in numbers of 6-12 from the top center of the crowns. As the fiddleheads begin to mature the brown paper skin will fall off, revealing a green glossy skin that is smooth and free of hairs.



STEMS

The stem of the fiddlehead will also have a u-shaped groove. As the ferns unfurl, fanning out, they can stand up to 4 feet tall. The plumed-out ferns are thought to resemble ostrich feathers hence the name Ostrich Fern.



LEAVES

The leaves like most ferns are compound with 25-60 leaflets per stalk. The leaflets are arranged opposite arranged along the stalk of the leaf and taper at each end with the middle being the widest part of the leaf. The leaflets have razored edges that have 20-40 pairs of lobes. The leaflets can reach up to 6 inches long.

HARVESTING

Fiddleheads season lasts from mid-April to mid-May depending on conditions. When harvesting fiddleheads, you want to make sure they are around 2-6 inches from the base of the crown. If you pick too close to the crown that can affect the health of the crown, once they reach over 8 inches they are past their prime. Take care not to damage the other ones, as they need more time to grow.

Fiddleheads are tender and best picked by hand. Knives can easily cause damage to the other fiddleheads. When removing the fiddleheads from the crown, gently snap it backward. It's important to not take more than half the number of fiddleheads present on the crown. This helps to maintain the vigor of the patch, preventing it from being overharvested. Location is also important, make sure not to harvest close to the roadside, as run-off can contaminate the soil.



"In our teaching, it's best to leave the taller fiddleheads as they represent the elders that help to lead the way and the youngest ones represent the generations to come. When taking from Mother Earth, we always think of others behind and before us."

- Jazz Thompson

PROCESSING

Use foresight when picking fiddleheads, as the time it takes to process fiddleheads is important. If fiddleheads are not processed quickly enough, they will begin to brown from oxidization. It is important to process them right away to hold their color, taste, and nutrients.

1 Separate the brown papery covering from the fiddleheads. This can be done several different ways from winnowing, rinsing, hand-cleaning to sifting.

2 Once you remove all the brown skin, fill a sink or bucket with cold water and rinse off any dirt and bugs from the fiddleheads.

3 It's important to blanch fiddleheads before any method of storing or cooking. To blanch bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Blanch the fiddleheads anywhere from 2 minutes or longer if preferred.

4 After blanching, immediately drain them and transfer them to iced water to halt the cooking process. Lay them flat in a place to dry for 20 minutes before storing.