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### [Ramping Up for Ramp Season](#)

To the average Joe and Jane, a ramp is little more than a sloped road. It's an incline. A way to get from Point A to Point B — without having to take the stairs. To foodies, however, *ramp* means more than *road*. It means *dinner*, too.



If you've never heard of them — let alone eaten them — ramps are mountain vegetables, grown most often in the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia and North Carolina. They're a member of the onion family, like leeks, and like so many favorite foods they come around just once a year. Luckily, that time is now, as the season's first leeks tend to make their way from the mountains to the markets in March and continue to do so throughout April and into May.

Because you don't have much time to try this delicious piece of green, a quick primer is probably in order. Here's what you need to know:

- **Where ramps come from:** Native to eastern North America, ramps, also called wild leeks, are related to onions and garlic. Scientists know them, however, as *Allium tricoccum*. Although there are many hypotheses, no one knows for sure how ramps came to be called *ramps*. One popular theory suggests they

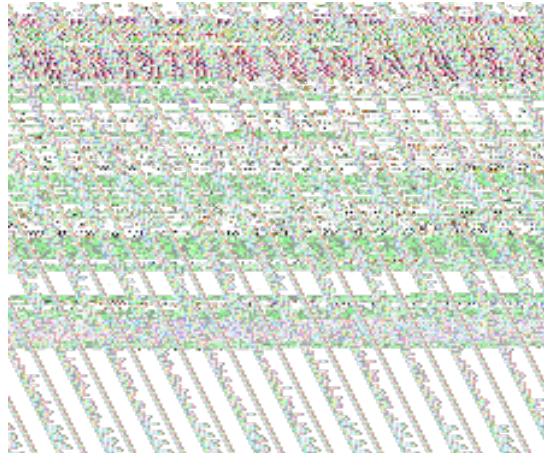
were named for the English folk name *Ramson* — son of Ram — since the plant appears during the sign of Aries on the zodiac calendar (and perhaps, unofficially, because *Ramson* sounds like *ransom*, which is appropriate since Mother Nature holds ramps hostage for all but a few months out of the year). However they got their modern name, ramps are probably much older than the English language, as the use of cultivated leeks — their closest relative — can be traced all the way back to ancient Egypt. Even if they're new to you, therefore, ramps are actually quite old. In fact, Native Americans used them as medicine, to treat coughs, colds, pain and itching. So if taste isn't enough, you can be sure that ramps are really, really good for you.

- **What ramps look like:** In the wild, ramps grow from bulbs, like tulips do, and eventually get up to 12 inches tall and 2 inches wide. Like green onions, they have an onion-like bulb of white — about a half inch around — at the bottom, from which sprouts a bunch of leafy greens. The leaves themselves are flat and feather-shaped, with a rash of slender, maroon-colored stalk connecting the white on the bottom to the green on the top.
- **How ramps taste:** The easiest way to identify a ramp isn't to see it. It's to smell it. Ramps smell like a combination of onion and garlic, only *much* stronger — so strong that kids were once rumored to eat them so that their teachers would send them home from school in order to escape the lingering odor on the children's breath. Although raw ramps are pungent, cooked ramps are much milder; they smell more like garlic, but taste more like onions — but earthier.
- **How ramps are prepared:** You can use ramps as a substitute for any recipe that calls for onions, garlic, leeks or scallions. You can use them cooked or raw, in soups or in casseroles. In their native Appalachia, however, they're most commonly fried along with potatoes in bacon grease, or scrambled with eggs for breakfast. The possibilities are endless.

There's a lot more one could learn about ramps, but the clock's ticking quickly away on all things spring. Besides, your palate's the best teacher there is. So quit clicking and start cooking, before the summer sun melts the ramps away for another year!

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