Let them eat weeds

By ACSH Staff — July 21, 2015

We’ve taken NYTimes columnist Mark Bittman to task for his superficial understanding of the food business, economics, or even common sense. His most recent story is no different: he advocates for weed foraging on city streets as a source of nutritious, organic food in underserved neighborhoods. Bittman himself goes foraging in Oakland, California in an accompanying video.

In a line that sounds like it came from The Onion, Bittman writes: Think, for a second, of the advantages: They’re organic. (They may be soiled by whatever happens on the street, but they’re not intentionally doused with chemicals.)

That’s right human waste, vehicle emissions runoff, stuff on people’s shoes, and whatever else is on the grimy city sidewalk might contaminate the weeds, but at least they’re organic!

Philip Stark, a University of California Berkeley statistics professor who accompanied Bittman on his urban foraging, says: There’s a lot of resistance to the idea of picking your own food out of the ground. There’s a stigma associated with it. People’s response is like: Ick, a dog might have peed on it. And a dog might have peed on it! But I can wash that off.

Stark seems unaware of the common practice of washing off store-bought produce before consuming it. Additionally, just last week, a University of California Davis study found that consumer exposure to pesticide residue is far below levels that would warrant health concern. Does picking and eating weeds from city sidewalks really seem like the healthier, safer option?

And a side note to Mr. Bittman: organic farming also uses pesticides just different types of pesticides. However, they are all still chemicals with the purpose of killing insects.
Stark also says: We don’t need to worry about these plants picking up lead or other things from the soil. In actuality, lead and other heavy metals in urban soil are a serious concern to many experts. The NYTimes itself published a story [6] on the problem of potential lead poisoning from urban farming back in 2009. The article states: Harmful even at very low doses, lead is surprisingly prevalent and persistent in urban and suburban soil. Dust from lead-tainted soil is toxic to inhale, and food grown in it is hazardous to eat.

Bittman’s article is painfully out of touch: while he may have had a nice afternoon foraging for weeds in Oakland with UC Berkeley professors, at the end of the day, the New York Times columnist, author, and TV star will go back to dining internationally and cooking gourmet dishes. Meanwhile, the 50 million Americans who live in food-insecure households and are at risk for malnutrition will not have their problems solved by street-foraged greens. That’s where GMOs and pesticides can actually do some good.