

Sorrel



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Scientific Classification and Etymology

Sorrel is of the genus *Rumex* and is a member of the knotweed family.¹ While *The Food and Drink in America* claims the name “sorrel” comes from the French word “surele” which means sour, *The Cambridge World History of Food and Drink* claims that “sorrel” actually comes from a Germanic word also meaning sour. Either way it’s clear that the plant is known for its sourness. Some species in the genus *Rumex* are not called sorrel but are called “dock.”²

Historical Importance

Sorrel is not well known in America and therefore is not often found in American cookbooks and in American meals.³ Thomas Jefferson reported seeing sorrel in Washington D.C. markets.⁴ The French are known for making the most use of the sorrel herb in their cooking.⁵ Sorrel was a popular herb amongst the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans.⁶

¹ Smith, Andrew F. editor. *Food and Drink in America*. (Oxford: University Press, 2004), II. 458-459.

² Kiple, Kenneth F. and Kriemhild Conee Ornelas. *The Cambridge World History of Food and Drink*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), II. 1854.

³ Smith, Andrew F. editor. *Food and Drink in America*. (Oxford: University Press, 2004), II. 458-459.

⁴ Smith, Andrew F. editor. *Food and Drink in America*. (Oxford: University Press, 2004), II. 458-459.

⁵ Smith, Andrew F. editor. *Food and Drink in America*. (Oxford: University Press, 2004), II. 458-459.

⁶ Kiple, Kenneth F. and Kriemhild Conee Ornelas. *The Cambridge World History of Food and Drink*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), II. 1854.

Horticulture and Plant Specifics

The sorrel herb grows perennially.⁷ The male and female parts of the sorrel grow on separate plants that can grow up to three feet in height.⁸ Varieties of sorrel include, French sorrel (*Rumex Scutatus*), garden sorrel or sheep sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*), *Rumex hymenosepalus*, spinach dock (*Rumex patientia*)⁹. The French and garden sorrel are the most commonly cultivate while the second two varieties are grown in North America but are not popular¹⁰. Each variety is slightly different and cultivated for a specific reason.

French sorrel: is less acidic than garden sorrel and is used in soup, salad, and egg dishes.¹¹

Garden sorrel: acid with distinct arrow shaped leaves.¹² Used as a vegetable or an herb.¹³ *Rumex articus*: Cultivated and used as a vegetable by the Inuit in the Artic. The Inuit are still known to boil the leaves for eating right away or to let the leaves ferment for later consumption.¹⁴

Cultivation

Sorrel plants are most successful in rich moist soil but can be grown in other types of soil as well. Seeds are planted in April or May a half an inch below the surface and distanced fifteen to eighteen inches apart.¹⁵ Most sorrel varieties are harvested for the leaf, like spinach and lettuce however some are harvest for the stem like rhubarb.¹⁶ In July or August the leaves are ready for harvesting. When growing sorrel one must take into consideration that some sorrel varieties are dioecious, meaning the male and female reproductive parts exist on separate plants. In order to grow a sorrel plant without purchasing new seeds the roots of a sapling must be divided in the proper way. In the

⁷ Masefield, G.B.. M Wallis, S.G. Harrison, B.E. Nicholson. *The Oxford Book of Food Plants*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 191.

⁸ Masefield, G.B.. M Wallis, S.G. Harrison, B.E. Nicholson. *The Oxford Book of Food Plants*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 191.

⁹ Kiple, Kenneth F. and Kriemhild Conee Ornelas. *The Cambridge World History of Food and Drink*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), II. 1854.

¹⁰ Smith, Andrew F. editor. *Food and Drink in America*. (Oxford: University Press, 2004), II. 458-459.

¹¹ Kiple, Kenneth F. and Kriemhild Conee Ornelas. *The Cambridge World History of Food and Drink*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), II. 1854.

¹² Masefield, G.B.. M Wallis, S.G. Harrison, B.E. Nicholson. *The Oxford Book of Food Plants*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 191.

¹³ Kiple, Kenneth F. and Kriemhild Conee Ornelas. *The Cambridge World History of Food and Drink*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), II. 1854.

¹⁴ Kiple, Kenneth F. and Kriemhild Conee Ornelas. *The Cambridge World History of Food and Drink*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), II. 1854.

¹⁵ Burr, Fearing. *Field and Garden Vegetables of America*. Illinois: The American (Botanist Book Sellers, 1988), 295-298.

¹⁶ Masefield, G.B.. M Wallis, S.G. Harrison, B.E. Nicholson. *The Oxford Book of Food Plants*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 191.

summer a flower will emerge from the plant and must be cut off to encourage greater and more desirable leaves for harvesting.¹⁷

As a perennial plant, sorrel will reappear after the winter has passed. Before winter approaches it is advisable to turn the soil and cover it lightly with a straw compost mixture.

French Sorrel: Usually twelve to eighteen inches tall. Leaves are described as round or heart shaped. Must be grown with eighteen inches between rows a foot between plants in rows. The French sorrel has a highly acidic leaf. The flower is hermaphrodite

Garden Sorrel: usually two feet tall. The variety is dioecious; the male plant grows many small red flowers while the female plant grows a naked blossom. The tiny triangular seeds can last for two years before they must be planted. Within the garden sorrel species there are five varieties: Bellville sorrel, Blistered leaf sorrel, fervent's new large sorrel, green or common garden sorrel, and sarcelle blond sorrel. Each variety has a slightly different leaf shape and cultivation needs.¹⁸

Pathogens and Pests

Nutrition

Sorrel is a very nutritious green leafy vegetable. It is high in vitamin A, vitamin C, and potassium.¹⁹

Medicinal Uses

The leaves of a sorrel plant are sometimes used to treat fevers, survy, itchy skin and ringworm. When dried or fresh the leaves can clear the system by serving as a diuretic or laxative. The juice from the leaf can be applied directly to the skin to calm rashes. Liquid from the root can be infused into one's body in order to treat jaundice, gravel and kidney stones. In combination with the roots the seeds have been used to for hemorrhage treatment.²⁰

Culinary

¹⁷ Burr, Fearing. *Field and Garden Vegetables of America*. Illinois: The American (Botanist Book Sellers, 1988), 295-298.

¹⁸ Burr, Fearing. *Field and Garden Vegetables of America*. Illinois: The American (Botanist Book Sellers, 1988), 295-298.

¹⁹ Kiple, Kenneth F. and Kriemhild Conee Ornelas. *The Cambridge World History of Food and Drink*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), II. 1854.

²⁰ Plants for a Future. www.pfaf.org 1996-2003 extracted March 14, 2008.

Sorrel can be eaten raw like lettuce or spinach in a salad or on a sandwich or it can be prepared. Because Sorrel can also be used as a herb it is delicious when shredded and added to soups particularly tomato soup or a fish soup. When adding sorrel to a cooked meal it is important to add it as late as possible because when cooked too long it becomes less appetizing. Sorrel leaves should not be dried but can be frozen in puree form. Generally one should use the small leaves to eat fresh and the large leaves to cook.²¹

²¹ Hyde, Brenda. "Sorrel: Greens or Herb" <http://www.seedsofknowledge.com/sorrel.html> extracted March 29, 2008.