

# Garden Sorrel

By Kathy Wolfe  
August 10, 2012



## An old world herb full of nutrition and flavor

The most asked about plant in the Discovery Garden vegetable plot must surely be our French sorrel (*Rumex scutatus*). Also known as common or garden sorrel, this prolific perennial herb is indigenous to England and has a vitamin content high in A and C and moderate levels of potassium, calcium and magnesium. It can be cultivated as a garden herb or leaf vegetable and grows in the greater part of Europe in almost all soils and situations. Other names include spinach dock, spinach rhubarb, herb patience or narrow-leaved dock.

It is a slender plant about 3 feet high, with deep roots and juicy stems. Its edible oblong 3"-6" lower leaves are slightly arrow-shaped at the base, with very long petioles (leafstalks).

People in many parts of the world use sorrel. Africans, Romanians, Russians and Turks all have traditional dishes using this herb. The Sami, an indigenous arctic people, originally added it to reindeer milk as a flavoring and preservative. In parts of Belgium it is served with mashed potatoes or as part of a dish containing eel and other green herbs. Rural Greeks use it with spinach, leeks and chard in spanakopita (a traditional Greek dish of spinach and feta cheese baked in phyllo dough). The French use it pureed in soups, sauces and *ragoûts*. It can be added to salads or baked in casseroles as a substitute for chard. The versatility of this nutritious herb has caught the attention of some local gardeners who have been delighted by its added flavor in soups and casseroles.



**Left:** Freshened by a summer shower, these garden sorrel leaves are ready to add a lemony bite to a crisp salad or soup. **Above:** Sheep sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*), considered by many to be a persistent garden weed because of its widely spreading rhizomes, is edible in small quantities. The leaves can also be added to salad for a bit of tartness. **Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners**

While sorrel has a pleasant lemony flavor, the plant's sharp taste comes from oxalic acid, which is a poison. In small quantities it is harmless; in large quantities it can be fatal. Due to its natural laxative properties, it is best used in moderation. Grow sorrel by sowing in early spring, 2-3 weeks before the last frost date, planting seeds ½" deep and 2" apart in full sun and well-drained soil. The soil needs to have a pH ranging from 5.5 –6.8. Thin plants when they are about 1"–2" high. Plants mature in about 60 days.

When stalks grow large in July, cut them back to the ground. Roots will then re-leaf and new, tender growth will emerge. Pick off or cut flowers to encourage leaf production. The plants can be divided by roots in spring or autumn. Space plantings 12 inches apart and water them thoroughly. Sorrel can also be grown in containers. After harvesting, store leaves in the refrigerator up to two weeks or preserve by freezing for longer storage. Leaves may also be dried and used as an herb.

While once a common ingredient in soups, stews, salads and sauces, the sorrel plant vanished from regular use in cooking for hundreds of years. Now this delightful, leafy green sorrel herb is finding its way back into gardens and kitchens, where its lemony flavor and nutritional value can be enjoyed each spring and summer. If you would like to try this delicious herb, local Master Gardener Ruth Sutton shares her recipe for Sorrel-Potato Soup. The lemony flavor of sorrel combines with the creaminess of potatoes to create a versatile soup that can be eaten hot or cold or made lighter by the addition of milk instead of cream:

\* \* \* \* \*

### **SORREL-POTATO SOUP**

1-1/2 lbs. potatoes	6 cups chicken broth
5-6 cups sorrel leaves (divided)	Lemon juice (optional)
1 cup chopped leeks or onions	Salt and pepper to taste
2 tablespoons butter or olive oil	1/2–1 cup milk or cream

Peel and chop potatoes and cover with cold water. Wash sorrel leaves and remove the stem running up the leaf. Slice the leaves into thin shreds.

Melt butter or warm olive oil in a pan. Add leeks or onions and cook over medium heat until leeks are wilted or onions are slightly translucent.

Drain the potatoes and add them to the pan with the broth and half the sorrel leaves. Simmer until potatoes are tender, approximately 20 minutes.

Remove potato mixture from heat and puree. Return pureed potato mixture to pan and reheat, seasoning with lemon juice, salt and pepper to taste.

Stir in remaining sorrel and simmer until wilted.

**Resources:**

- The Herb Companion  
<http://www.herbcompanion.com/gardening/herb-to-know-sorrel-rumex-scutatus-r-acetosa.aspx>
- Gardeningknowhow.com  
<http://www.gardeningknowhow.com/herb/sorrel-herb.htm>

**WSU Know and Grow Workshop**

The Master Gardener Know and Grow workshops are back! This month Master Gardener Claudia Wells teaches the art of flower arranging using flowers and foliage from your own yard.

**Where:** WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research and Extension Center  
16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway)

**When:** Tuesday, August 14th

**Time:** 1:00 PM – 2:30 PM

**Cost:** Free, pre-registration not required

**Details:** For more information call (360) 428-2370 ext. 0