

# Succulent thoughts

Not content with regular supermarket fare, *Jane Perrone* wrings out the water to find tastier, more unusual salad leaves to grow at home

A recent article in the *Washington Post*, entitled 'Why salad is so overrated', described lettuce as 'a vehicle to transport refrigerated water from farm to table'. Food writer Tamar Haspel agrees. Lettuce, she says, is low in nutrition, a major source of food waste, a carrier of foodborne illnesses... all in all, a complete waste of space in the salad drawer.

All this is true – assuming you buy lettuce in mixed bags from the supermarket, do not wash it yourself and end up throwing half of it away. But homegrown lettuce? If you have a small patch to grow your own, there is very little waste, the likelihood of food contamination is low, and you can sample a whole world of beautiful, tasty lettuce, from the red-speckled Austrian heirloom 'Forellenschluss' to the abundant, frizzy green leaves of the appealing Batavian varieties. That said, there is no escaping the fact that Haspel is right about the lightweight status in nutritional terms of lettuce. There are other green leaves that far outstrip lettuce when it comes to vitamins and minerals.

Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*) is the king when it comes to omega-3 fatty acids at least, containing more than any other leafy plant. It is also rich in vitamins A, C, and E. All this makes purslane a wise alternative to those who wish to push lettuce to the kerb, or simply expand their salad repertoire. This succulent, sprawling plant with red stems and paddle-shaped green leaves now grows both wild (it is often considered a weed) and cultivated in many places around the world, but it originated in Iran and India. Mahatma Gandhi was a devotee of luni-bhaji, as it is known in North India, but many cuisines around the world have long known its value. Mexicans tend to eat it with eggs; it is a key ingredient in the Arab bread salad known as *fattoush*, and the Portuguese turn it into soup, *sopa de Verdolagas*.

One of the much-repeated comments about purslane is drawn from Jane Grigson's *Vegetable Book*, a wonderful resource for recipes and anecdotes about all manner of plants. She states: 'One authority remarks that in Malawi the name means "buttocks of the wife of a chief" which helps in remembering their shape and fleshy texture.' I couldn't find the source of this unnamed 'authority',

## SALAD DAYS

Good advice from Charles Dowding, no-dig gardening and organic vegetable specialist

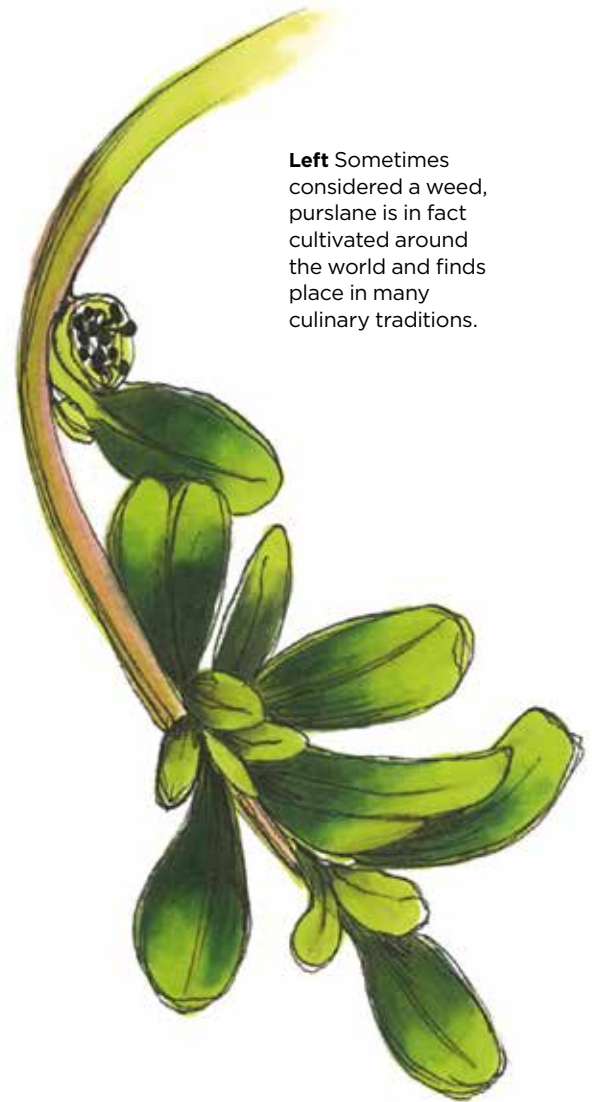
**Varieties** As well as green summer purslane, there is pretty golden purslane, but I find this one more inclined to seed.

**Soil** Summer purslane is a salad with the rare attribute of preferring dry conditions. The seeds are tiny, so sow thinly. Also, cover with only a thin amount of soil or compost. When sowing outside, water the drill a little, then cover with dry soil. You should find a row within 10 days. Allow 20cm between rows, then thin to 3-10cm between plants. Eat the thinnings after 3 weeks.

**Position** Struggles with wet but enjoys sunlight.

**Harvesting** Beware the tiny bitter seed pods: they develop within two months of sowing, so sow a small amount every two weeks for continuous picking. Eat the shoots of each stalk, pinched off or cut, then new shoots further down the stem.

**Left** Sometimes considered a weed, purslane is in fact cultivated around the world and finds place in many culinary traditions.



so I enlisted the help of author Eleni Cotton, who is half-Malawian. It turns out that, yes, in Malawi purslane is known by the Chichewa name, *matako a akazi awo amfumu*.

Purslane's flavour is variously described as sour, slightly acrid, and mild and sweet with lemony undertones. But my tastebuds detect a salty edge; perhaps because the fleshy leaves and red stems resemble seaweed.

It is the same with another fleshy leaf, buckshorn plantain (*Plantago coronopus*), which is usually called nutty, yet to me is salty. While purslane is a summer crop, buckshorn plantain is a winter salad

## A NEW LEAF

crop that is useful in the cooler months.

I started growing this plant, a relation of the ubiquitous weed, broadleaf plantain (*Plantago major*), after failing in several attempts to germinate the succulent seaside plant rock samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*) – a failure possibly not surprising as I live in landlocked Bedfordshire.

I gave up and looked for alternatives that would give me a seaweedy crunch and the whiff of the sea, without all the hard work of applying saline solutions and the like. I knew I had struck gold when I came across buckshorn plantain in the catalogue of the Real Seed Company, whose blurb noted: ‘one gardening advice column said if you can’t grow this, you should give up gardening’.

Although largely unknown in the UK, this plant is known as *minutina* or *erba stella* in Italy, and is a popular winter green. It is often sold as a perennial but I find it short-lived, so worth sowing fresh seed every year or two. But Real Seeds were right: this one really is easy. It sits low to the ground so the hairy leaves need careful soaking and washing before eating. The recipe below is my favourite way to use it at this time of year.



**Left** Rock samphire, less successful than the author had hoped. **Below** Buckshorn plantain is a tasty perennial that is easy to grow.



## I gave up and looked for alternatives that would give me a seaweedy crunch and the whiff of the sea...

Flicking through the Chiltern Seeds catalogue recently, I found one more salty leaf I must try. Common scurvygrass (*Cochlearia officinalis*) was, as the name suggests, a coastal dweller eaten by sailors to ward off the scurvy owing to its high vitamin C content. It is not something you would wish to eat in great quantity, but Scottish forager Mark Williams suggests that its salty, mustard-hot leaves, if dried and used in moderation, can act as

a seasoning. Given its unappealing descriptor, I think I shall use its other common name, spoonwort, when I serve it to guests.

*The Real Seed Catalogue,*  
[www.realseeds.co.uk](http://www.realseeds.co.uk)  
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## RECIPE: BUCKSHORN PLANTAIN AND LENTIL SALAD

This month's recipe is one of my own as I love buckshorn plantain leaves, but few recipes list them as an ingredient. This is a winter store-cupboard creation that can be thrown together in five minutes to accompany a bowl of soup, or sealed into a lunch box to take to work. It just needs fresh buckshorn plantain (which should be available now if grown in polytunnels, greenhouses or in a cold frame), but purslane works just as well. If neither of these is available, simply substitute tender young kale leaves.

### INGREDIENTS:

*1 large handful of buckshorn plantain leaves*  
*1 x 400g can green lentils*  
*60g sunflower or pumpkin seeds – or a mix of the two*  
*1 medium-hot red chilli, finely chopped*  
*The zest and juice of 1 lemon*  
*60g currants*  
*60ml olive oil*  
*6 sun-dried tomatoes, roughly chopped*  
*A pinch of salt*

### METHOD:

Soak the buckshorn plantain in salty water for a few minutes. Rinse, drain and pat dry the leaves, then chop finely. Toast the seeds in a frying pan until they are light brown and set aside. Rinse and drain the lentils and add the chilli, lemon zest, sundried tomatoes, currants, garlic, buckshorn plantain and seeds. Pour over the oil and lemon juice and stir thoroughly. Test the flavour and salt if necessary. Leave to rest for 30 minutes to let the currants absorb the juices. ■