

Eat Your Weeds

Supplement your salads with uninvited guests.

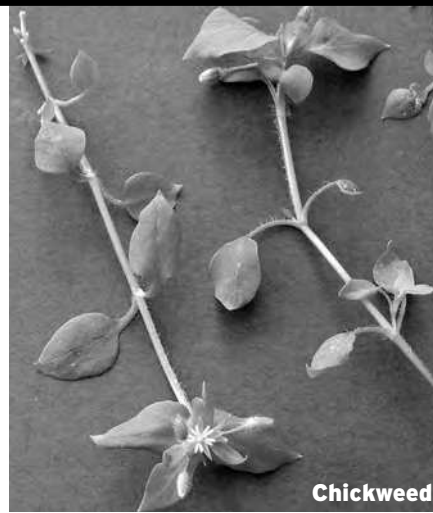
Some time last winter I dropped by Marche Café for one of their delicious open-faced sandwiches. Smoked salmon, I think. It arrived with a little side salad composed entirely of chickweed. This spring, I noticed chickweed creeping into local salad mixes, too. And why not? Chickweed stems, leaves and flowers are all edible and good. It is tender, tasty, a refreshing shade of light green, and it's abundant. Organic farms and gardens are full of chickweed in winter and early spring. A few weeks after eating that chickweed salad I saw it flourishing as a living mulch for cabbages at FOOD for Lane County's Grassroots Garden on Coburg Road.

Nick Routledge, whose winter gardening workshop was featured in last month's column, points out that chickweed, dandelion, nettles and bittercress are "primary constituents in the very early spring-and-onwards diets of local deep gardeners." There is no reason why more casual gardeners should not eat them too. Maybe we'll become a little deeper in the process. For there are practical as well as philosophical benefits to be had from cherishing — and eating — your weeds. Weeds are terrific scavengers of minerals, which is good for your garden and for your health.

Several studies show that nutritional values of meats and vegetables in the Western diet have been falling sharply in

recent decades. In particular, mineral content has dropped alarmingly: by as much as 70 percent in some foods. The cause appears to be our dependence on fast-growing hybrids and modern agricultural practices that don't compensate for what we take out of the soil. Organically grown vegetables and meats score better, but augmenting your salads with mineral-rich weeds can't hurt. Chickweed, for instance, is a good source of iron, phosphorus, calcium and magnesium, as well as being high in vitamin C. Any chickweed you don't eat gets composted or tilled into your soil, where the mineral content becomes available to your cultivated vegetables.

The garden benefits in another way, too. Beneficial insects use all the above-mentioned plants and many more, especially weeds with tiny white flowers, such as bittercress, chickweed and wild carrot. Growing such plants in insectary rows between your main-season crops or, where appropriate, as a cover crop for your raised beds in winter makes sense if you count on natural pest control. Dandelions and stinging nettle are perennial. Nettle shoots are for early spring eating and they need cooking. Dandelions are always with us and the leaves are edible any time, raw or cooked, but their bitterness is least pronounced early in the year, before the plants bloom. Blanching the leaves (by covering them



Chickweed

with an upturned, light-proof container) makes them even more mild and palatable.

Bittercress and chickweed are cool weather annuals at their most prolific in late winter and early spring. Common chickweed (*Stellaria media*) is a gently sprawling, pale green plant with leaves up to half an inch long. Little Western bittercress (*Cardamine oligosperma*) is that small but annoying plant that blankets disturbed soil in late winter. Each deep green, rosette-shaped plant sends up a vertical flowering shoot that will eventually, if you wait too long, shoot seeds in your eye while you are weeding. Individual plants are small but they tend to grow in mats, making it relatively easy to harvest a salad's worth. Bittercress is a mustard, and the leaves are indeed spicy. If you find them too strong to eat straight, mix them with chickweed or with your customary salad greens.

If you don't have abundant chickweed and bittercress in your winter garden,

there's time to seek out a few plants and convey them to your yard. Both grow (and bear seed) in coolish places all through the summer. Shade-loving miner's lettuce (*Claytonia perfoliata*, a native) is another prolific self seeder. If you have none in your yard and can't find it, you should only have to buy seed once. Territorial Seed Company describes it as "probably the most cold tolerant" of the greens they sell, though Nick Routledge says it's particularly good under cover. Also available from TSC and other seed suppliers are chervil and corn salad (mache). Sow them when you would other cool weather salad greens, in August and September. After that they should self-sow in your garden.

The urge to supplement your salad with weeds may be greatest in winter, but summer has its own wild offerings. Lately I've been nibbling on all sorts of things. Amaranth (an annual pigweed) pops up regularly in my flower garden and grows quickly. It has a mild spinachy flavor. Fennel seedlings, green or purple, are delicious any time, and seem to emerge wherever I disturb the ground. A friend has purslane (*Portulaca olearacea*) all over her vegetable plot and has been enjoying it all summer. (Mine grows only in the gravel paths, and it has less flavor.) This mucilaginous succulent is pleasantly crunchy, with a slightly acid, mildly peppery flavor. Like chickweed, it contains vitamin C and a heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acid, and it's a lot cheaper than salmon. **EW**

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