



Sorrel *Rumex species*

'The Sorrels'— although there are many species, we will elaborate on three: *Rumex acetosa* (Common Sorrel), *Rumex scutatus* (French Sorrel), and *Rumex acetosella* (Sheep Sorrel). Sorrels belong to the Polygonaceae family (docks and buckwheat are included in this large family), and are native to Europe and Asia; all referred to here, are perennials, and closely related to wild dock—they have been known as salad or 'pot herbs' and medicinal herbs for a very long time.

(Image: Sorrel with mature flowers, summer; Karina Hilterman) →



Identification & Cultivation: Common or Garden Sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*)



prefers a rich moist soil whereas French Sorrel (aka buckler sorrel, or shield-leaf sorrel) (*Rumex scutatus*) and Sheep Sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*) prefer a lighter dryer soil and will grow well in stony ground.

All sub species are perennial. Common has a more erect and clump habit with deep roots, and French Sorrel more sprawling, whereas Sheep Sorrel spreads rampantly by underground runners. If you have an infestation of Sorrel, it indicates your soil is acidic and needs to 'be sweetened', use dolomite, or lime for this.

All species contain oxalic acid, eat, and enjoy sparingly.

←(Image: *Rumex acetosa*; spring, Karina Hilterman)

I used to keep hens in a huge enclosure and they loved to find ways to escape. Finding freedom, they would head directly to my French Sorrel clump, pecking it to the ground. I resorted to making a cage to protect the Sorrel, ironically, out of chicken netting—it was the only way I could harvest any for myself.



Mention also is given here to *Rumex sanguineus* or red-veined or bloody dock; it is grown as an ornamental, looking lovely in a herbaceous border and in salads.

(Image: *Rumex sanguineus*, Karina Hilterman) →

French sorrel has a sprawling habit, growing up to about 60cm, depending on growing conditions. It prefers good moist soils, though is tolerant of most. It has a lemony zing, excellent in salads with other ingredients; it is less acid than *Rumex acetosa*.



←(Image: *Rumex scutatus*, Botanical Garden in Wroclaw, Poland; Krzysztof Ziarnek)

Sheep Sorrel; (aka sour weed, field or red sorrel), thrives in poor or acidic soil; it can be a real nuisance for gardeners; if 'flourishing', it can indicate the soil is acidic; some control of this can be achieved by 'sweetening' the soil. It is one of the essential ingredients of Essiac Tea, used as a treatment for cancer. This was traditionally used by the Ojibway Indians from North America. The four herbs in the 'Essiac blend' are

sheep sorrel, burdock root, slippery elm bark, and Turkey rhubarb root. Occasionally, other herbs are added to the formulation, depending on the requirement of the patient. These may include kelp, red clover, blessed thistle, and watercress.

Energetic Character: Sorrel is sour, cool, and slightly astringent.

Constituents: Oxalic acid, tartaric acid, tannic acid, anthraquinones, Vitamin C (high levels), flavonoids.

(Image: Sheep sorrel invading an Iris, Karina Hilterman) →

Therapeutic Actions: Diuretic, laxative, astringent, anti-scorbutic (helps cure or prevent scurvy), cooling, vermifuge (expels worms), anti-inflammatory, and nutritive.

Medicinal Uses: Maurice Mességué, a French herbalist, recommends an infusion from the roots and seeds for stomachache, colic, and diarrhoea. As Sorrel is high in vitamin C, it can assist to prevent scurvy. A tea made with flowers, leaves and honey, it can soothe the throat and relieves mouth ulcers.

Boiled in wine it cures abdominal pains. Herb wines are a traditional method for taking herbs, Doctors in the past used to prescribe herb wines as treatments. As an astringent, it can be used for staunching haemorrhages, also used for hepatitis, as a blood cleanser and tonic. There has been some research undertaken in Korea and Japan assessing the constituents of *R. acetosa* for inhibiting cancers (anti-mutagenicity). Fundamentally, Sorrel is a good cleansing and detoxing remedy and when used in moderation can help the body in its pursuit of wellness. (See caution)

Externally: Traditionally, sorrel was prescribed for scabs, ringworm, itchy skin, festering sores and wounds, mouth ulcers and boils. It is considered a good liver tonic, as boils are often due to liver toxicity and congestion.

Dosage: Infusion: Drink it as a diuretic or laxative, as a cooling drink for fever. 1 cup of hot water with 1tsp chopped fresh leaves daily (not continually), or as a culinary ingredient.

Caution: As it is high in oxalic acid it should not be over consumed, or cooked in aluminium or iron cooking utensils. It is this acid which gives sorrel and oxalis its citrusy zing, it can though block absorption of other nutrients, accumulate to cause kidney stones and aggravate rheumatic conditions

Culinary Uses: Sorrels name is derived from the Teutonic for sour – the Egyptians and Romans ate it to counter the discomfort from over indulgence of rich food. It has a reputation for sharpening the appetite and was highly regarded around the time of Henry VIII. From reading history, it sounds like it was just as well. They were certainly not 'healthy times'. John Evelyn (1620-1706) thought much of its addition to salads saying it, "imparts a grateful quickness to the rest as supplying the want of oranges and lemon." It can be made into sauce – hence its folk name of "green sauce" and eaten with roast or cold meats, omelettes, and fish – the tartness is much like apples.

(Image: sheep sorrel, Henripekka Kallio, Finland) →

⊗ As it is high in oxalic acid it should not be over consumed, or cooked in aluminium or iron cooking utensils.

Higher intake of it can lead to formation of small stones of calcium oxalate. However, one reference says, "Sorrel is good for expelling kidney stones". The juice from the stems and leaves curdle milk.



Traditionally, Laplanders used it as a rennet substitute. Moderation in all things!

For a cooling salad, tear up sorrel and lettuce leaves – toss together in French dressing sweetened with a little honey. Sorrel soup is a popular French dish. It can also be cooked as spinach, either on its own or with other greens.

French sorrel has bigger leaves and “less of a bite”, so is better suited as a salad vegetable.

Sorrel Soup:

60 g butter, 20 sorrel leaves wash trimmed, salt and pepper, 1 leek, washed and finally sliced, 3 potatoes peeled and diced, 5 cup chicken stock (use vegetable stock if preferred), 1 cup hot fresh milk or light cream, 6-8 extra leaves shredded, Chopped parsley.

Method: Melt half the butter in a large saucepan; add the sorrel leaves and leek. Cook over a low heat till they soften, without colouring. Season with salt and pepper, add potato, stir in the chicken stock, cover and simmer gently for 20 min. Sieve or puree the potato mixture. Reheat in clean pan. Melt remaining butter in a small saucepan, add the extra sorrel, and cook slowly until most of the moisture is lost. Add to the soup then blend in the hot milk or cream and adjust seasoning. Reheat but do not boil. Serve immediately garnished with chopped parsley-Serves 6-this may also be served as a chilled soup for hot summer days. It is refreshing and delicious.

Sorrel is commonly used in the cuisines of Greece, Northern, Western, Central and Eastern Europe.

Other Uses: As a dye plant, a mordant is not usually required.

History & Mystery: Here we have plenty of this: Ruling planet – Venus; Element – Earth; Gender – Feminine energy; and Powers – Healing and health

Generally, Sorrel has many folk names including sour grass, sour suds, green sauce, cuckoo sorrow and gowke meat. Specifically, the common names for *R. acetosa* are Sorrel, Common Sorrel, Garden Sorrel, Narrow-leaved Dock, Spinach Dock. For *R. acetosella* are Sheep's Sorrel, Common Sheep Sorrel, Field Sorrel, Red Sorrel. For *Rumex scutatus* common names are French Sorrel, Leaf-shield Sorrel.

The name Sorrel is derived from Teutonic for sour.

The Egyptians and Romans ate it to counter the discomfort from over indulgence in rich food.

“Sorrel is prevalent in all hot diseases, to cool any inflammation and heat of blood in agues pestilential or choleric, or sickness or fainting, arising from heat, and to refresh the overspent spirits with the violence of furious or fiery fits of agues: to quench thirst, and procure an appetite in fainting or decaying stomachs: For it resists the putrefaction of the blood, kills worms, and is a cordial to the heart, which the seed doth more effectually, being more drying and binding.... Both roots and seeds, as well as the herb, are held powerful to resist the poison of the scorpion. . . . The leaves, wrapt in a colewort leaf and roasted in the embers, and applied to a large imposthume, botch boil, or plague-sore, doth both ripen and break it. The distilled water of the herb is of much good use for all the purposes aforesaid.” – Nicholas Culpepper (1616-1654), English Herbalist.

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“Sorrel sharpens the appetite, assuages heat, cools the liver and strengthens the heart; is an antiscorbutic, resisting putrefaction and in the making of sallets imparts a grateful quickness to the rest as supplying the want of oranges and lemons so grateful a quickness to the salad that it should never be left out. Together with salt, it gives both the name and the relish to sallets from the sapidity, which renders not plants and herbs only, but men themselves pleasant and agreeable.” 1720 – John Evelyn (1620-1706), English Herbalist and Writer

It might be sour to taste, find a place for it in your garden anyway, especially if you have chooks and enjoy flavoursome salads.

Prepared for the Herb Federation of New Zealand’s Herb Awareness Month 2023-www.herbs.org.nz

References: <https://pfaf.org/user/Default.aspx>, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sorrel>

Advisory Note: This text is given as a general guidance. If any adverse reactions occur or symptoms persist, please contact a qualified medical herbalist or medical doctor immediately.