SORREL, SHEEP’S

*Rumex acetosella*
[ROO-meks a-kee-TOE-sell-uh]

**Family:** Polygonaceae

**Names:** green sauce, common sorrel, field sorrel, sourgrass, sourweed

**Description:** Slender, low-growing, smooth, sour-tasting perennial; 4-12 inches. The jade-green leaves, arranged in a rosette when the plants are young, are arrow-shaped with winglike lobes at their bases. They are often tinged with red. The flower stems are slender, and several grow from the rather shallow roots. The flowers are extremely minute and grow in tiny clusters. Male and female flowers are borne on separate plants. The root system is extensive though shallow, and the plant reproduces itself by spreading underground runners as well as from seeds.

**Cultivation:** Succeeds in most soils, preferring a moist moderately fertile well-drained soil in a sunny position. Although a plant of acid soils, it can tolerate some alkalinity. Dioecious. Male and female plants must be grown if seed is required. Sow seed in autumn or spring in situ. Division in spring.

**History:** *Rumex* is derived from the Latin *rumo* “to suck,” because the leaves were sucked to relieve thirst. *Acetosella* is derived from the Latin *acetum* “vinegar,” and refers to the acidic vinegar-like taste due to the presence of oxalic acid in the leaves. Sheep sorrel is an ingredient of the anticancer remedy known as Essiac. In Tudor times, sorrel was an important salad plant and pot herb, and an esteemed medicinal plant as well. Green Sauce, an old folkname, is a reminder of a favorite way of eating it in Tudor times. The fresh leaves were mashed with vinegar and sugar to the consistency of a sauce and served as an accompaniment for cold meats. The Mohegans of Connecticut called the plant Sourweed. The fresh leaves were chewed and said to be good for the stomach. The Pennsylvania Dutch called Sorrel *Sauerrampel*. They made a diuretic tea from the leaves and ate leaves in salads to prevent scurvy. In the Ozark Mountains, sorrel has remained in use as a folk cure and is still used to treat a variety of skin diseases. Sorrel has been the central feature in the commemoration of a great Irish victory over the Norse invaders. The battle took place in County Meath, northwest of Dublin, in AD 980. According to local tradition, when the sorrel turns crimson in summer, giving the meadows a reddish hue, the leaves of this weed each year point to the graves of all the ancient patriots whose blood was spilled on the Hill of Tara.

** Constituents:** Contains oxalates and anthraquinones (including chrysophanol, emodin and physcion). In isolation, the anthraquinones are irritant and have a laxative effect.
**Medicinal Uses:** Leaf tea of this common European alien traditionally used for fevers, inflammation, scurvy. Sheep’s sorrel is a detoxifying herb, the fresh juice having a pronounced diuretic effect. It has been used as a liver stimulant and blood alterative that is useful in treating skin disorders and various other metabolic imbalances. Fresh leaves considered cooling. The leaves poulticed (after roasting) are used for tumors, wens, folk cancer remedy. Root tea used for diarrhea, excessive menstrual bleeding. The leaves are mildly laxative and holds out potential as a long-term treatment for chronic disease, in particular that of the gastrointestinal tract. Another herb in the famous Essiac tonic. For tea use ½ cup of leaves per pint of boiling water. Let steep 10 minutes and strain. Cool in the refrigerator. Drink 1-2 cups per day. For a root decoction, place 1 tsp of powdered root into 1 cup of boiling water. Simmer covered 10 minutes, strain, and cool. Drink 1-2 cups per day.

**Toxicity:** May cause poisoning in large doses due to high oxalic acid and tannin content.

**Cosmetic Uses:** The juice of sorrel leaves steeped in water is reputed to make the skin smooth and clear. Chop 1 cupful of fresh, washed sorrel leaves. Put them in a bowl and pour 3 cups of boiling water over them. Cool to tepid, then strain. This wash should be patted gently over the face and neck. It can also be added to the bath.

**Other Uses:** Before discarding the water in which sorrel has been parboiled, a cleaning cloth can be rinsed in it to wipe wicker furniture squeaky clean. Ink stains are said to disappear if they are first rubbed with freshly picked sorrel, then washed in soap and rinsed. (Try this on something old first.)

**Culinary Uses:** After collecting sheep sorrel, discard flower stalks, if any, and rinse the herb in cold water. Shake moisture from the leaves and store up to 10 days in the refrigerator. Sheep sorrel is tasty raw or cooked. It makes an excellent addition to salads and soups. Try seasoning fish dishes or rice with a few freshly chopped leaves. Many European cooks not only cook regularly with sheep sorrel, but also use it as an attractive garnish for gourmet dishes. It can be dried and mixed with blander dried wild herbs for tea. It also freezes well by packing freshly washed greens into freezer containers and placed directly into the freezer. Fresh sorrel greens may be cooked in a small amount of boiling water for five to six minutes and seasoned to taste with salt, pepper and butter for a quick economical vegetable rich in vitamin A.

Irish peasants came to prepare sorrel with fish and milk; Laplanders used the juice of the leaves as a substitute for rennet to curdle milk. Scandinavians sometimes put sorrel into bread in order to benefit from the plant’s small content of starch and mucilage. To tenderize tough meat before cooking, early English peasants tied sorrel leaves around the cuts. A refreshing drink can be made by extracting the juice from 8 ounces of sorrel leaves and blending it with 12 oz buttermilk, sweetened with honey.

**Recipes**

**Sorrel Swamp Soda**
6 cups water
1 ½ cups sugar
6 cups sheep-sorrel, chopped
club soda
green food coloring

Bring to boil first three ingredients, then let set for 3-4 hours. Strain liquid through cheese cloth. Add a few drops of green food coloring, if desired. Fill glasses 1/3 full of sorrel liquid, add a few ice cubes and fill with soda. (How to Prepare Common Wild Foods)

**Sheep Sorrel Cake**
½ cup margarine
3 ½ cups sugar
1 egg
2 cups sheep sorrel
2 tsp baking soda
2/3 cup boiling water
2 ½ cups flour
¼ tsp salt
½ tsp each ground cinnamon, cloves and allspice
1 cup raisins
2/3 cup walnuts, chopped

Puree sorrel in blender with 1/3 cup boiling water. In mixing bowl, cream sugar, margarine, egg and pureed sorrel. Combine soda with remaining boiling water and add alternately with remaining dry ingredients. Food in nuts and raisins. Pour into 8 x 12” square baking pan and bake 350F for 1 hour. (How to Prepare Common Wild Foods)

Sorrel and Cabbage Salad
1 large head cabbage, shredded
1 large onion, shredded
2/3 cup sugar
2/3 cup vinegar
½ cup sheep sorrel
½ cup salad oil
1 Tbsp dry mustard
1 tsp celery seed

Spoon cabbage into large bowl. Sprinkle onion over top. Sprinkle with sugar. Avoid stirring. Blend vinegar, sheep sorrel, oil, mustard and celery seed in blender. Pour into saucepan and heat to boiling. Pour over cabbage mixture. Do not mix. Chill at least 5 hours before serving. (How to Prepare Common Wild Foods)

Sheep sorrel and Miner’s Lettuce Toss
2 cups sheep sorrel leaves
1 ½ cups miner’s lettuce
4 hard-cooked eggs, diced
¼ cup cooked black-eyed peas, drained
6 strips bacon, fried and crumbled
1 Tbsp onion, grated
¾ cup salad oil
½ cup wine vinegar
1 tsp salt
½ tsp dry mustard
¼ tsp freshly ground pepper

Add greens to salad bowl with eggs, peas, bacon and onions. Mix remaining ingredients in bottle to serve with salad (How to Prepare Common Wild Foods)

Sheep Sorrel Wine
4 lbs sheep sorrel
1 tsp almond extract
1 gallon boiling water
4 lbs sugar
½ yeast cake
¾ Tbsp unflavored gelatin

Combine sorrel, extract and water. Let stand 5 days and strain. Add sugar and yeast; add gelatin dissolved in small amount of water. Let mixture rest for 3 days. Put into jug and top with fermentation cork. After action ceases, strain, bottle and cap. Let age at least 6 months before serving. (How to Prepare Common Wild Foods)

Sorrel and Potato Fritatta
2 medium potatoes
vegetable oil for frying
2 cups chopped sorrel leaves
rosemary
4 or 5 eggs
salt and freshly ground pepper
3 scallions

Peel and slice potatoes. Fry in oil in a large ovenproof frying pan until brown on both sides. Add sorrel and rosemary to the pan, and fry briefly. Beat the eggs, add salt and pepper to taste, and pour over sorrel and potatoes. Cook until edges are set. Chop the scallions (both green and white parts), sprinkle them over the eggs, and slide pan under the broiler. Cook until top of fritatta is set, puffy, and lightly browned. Serve piping hot. (A City Herbal)

References:
A City Herbal, Maida Silverman, Ash Tree Publishing;

Resources:
Companion Plants, www.companionplants.com
plants