**WINTERCRESS**

*Barbarea vulgaris*
[barb-AR-rec-uh vul-GAY-ris]

**Family:** Cruciferae

**Names:** Herb of St. Barbara, Upland Cress, Yellow Rock, yellow rocket, Barbarakruid, Bottonaria, Common Wintercress, Erba Barbara, Garden Yellow-rocket, Gewoon Barbarakruid, Land Cress, Winter Kresse, Bitter Wintercress

**Description:** Stem is branching, smooth, many-stemmed, leaves alternate, up to 8 dm tall. Leaves are pinnately cut, basal rosette, terminal lobe rounded, dark green, glossy, upper leaves broad and toothed. The flowers are yellow 5-7 mm wide, terminal sepals, pistil long and slender. If the rosettes of long, smooth, dark green leaves are not harvested when they first shove up directly from the perennial and biennial roots during winter and early spring, they become too bitter to enjoy.

**Cultivation:** A bed made up in semishade and in a soil containing humus will be productive for several years and the plants bay be used all year. Like watercress, it is rich in iron and sulfur. Seed is sown in spring in a frame or in shallow drills, and germination takes about 3 weeks if the soil is kept moist. When the seedlings are large enough to handle, move to a prepared bed and plant 8 inches apart. The first green will be ready to cut in late autumn. To keep the plants growing in cold weather, surround half the bed with 12 inch boards; cover in plastic.

**History:** The herb of St. Barbara, as winter cress has been called, became associated with that legendary saint because its seed was traditionally sown on December 4, which was her feast day. As the name winter cress implies, this wild relative of broccoli stays green all winter, sprouting afresh each time the snow melts. In the days before rapid transportation made possible the shipment of southern produce to northern markets, winter cress was one of the few fresh greens available in the North during winter. About 1900, winter cress seed still appeared in the catalogs of mail-order nurseries, but its strong flavor has made it unpalatable to modern tastes. Another link to its namesake, the martyr St. Barbara, is found in the plant’s soothing powers. St. Barbara, who refused to renounce her belief in God was traditionally invoked against lighting and fire and thus she became the patron saint of military architects, artillerymen and miners, who run risks from the gunpowder and flames with which they work. Traditionally, they have relied on winter cress as a dressing for wounds.

**Properties:** Antiscorbutic; Appetizer; Diuretic; Vulnerary.
Medicinal Uses: The leaves are vulnerary and have been used as a poultice for treating wounds. A tea made from the leaves is appetizer, antiscorbutic and diuretic.

Toxicity: Recent tests indicate winter cress may produce kidney malfunction.

Culinary Uses: The young blossoms can be enjoyed like broccoli. Best to eat in the bud stage, these developing clusters of tiny, four-petaled, golden flowers, each resembling a small Maltese cross, indicate that these edible herbs belong among the numerous native and European species of mustard. The greens, picked before the plant blossoms or after the initial frosts of autumn, are good either as salad plants or as pot-herbs. If the radishlike bitterness is objective, drain off the first boiling water, then simmer in fresh water until tender. The buds, along with no more than a few of the opened blossoms, simmer into a broccoli-like savoriness, the important thing being not to cook them to mushiness. To increase the productivity of the plants, remove the flowering stems as they appear (they can be eaten like the leaves) and pick the outer leaves as the plant regrows. Seeds can be sprouted and used as food.

Recipes:

**Wintercress Soup**
3/4 cup green onions (chopped)
2 cups wintercress leaves (chopped)
2 tablespoons butter
2 cups milk
2 tablespoons flour
salt and pepper to taste
2 cups chicken broth

In a large saucepan, sauté onions in butter. Add flour and cook for several minutes until thick. Add chicken broth. Add wintercress and simmer for 10 minutes. Add milk and salt and pepper. Simmer for 5 more minutes.

**Wintercress Au Gratin**
1 pound wintercress flower buds
salt and pepper to taste

1/3 cup onion (chopped)
1/4 cup Parmesan cheese
3 tablespoons butter
1 teaspoon paprika
2 tablespoons flour
1/2 cup sharp cheddar cheese (shredded)

Lightly boil wintercress for 5 minutes. Drain and save liquid. Sauté onions in butter until brown. Add flour and 1 cup of wintercress liquid. Stir constantly. Stir in cheddar cheese until melted. Add salt and pepper to taste. Pour some of the sauce into a baking dish. Add wintercress flowerbuds and cover with remaining sauce. Sprinkle with Parmesan cheese and paprika. Broil for 5 minutes or until light brown.

References:
Magic and Medicine of Plants

Plants for a Future Database

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