

Herbs for Easter

The herb garden is a ray of hope at Easter, providing tasty nibbles and flavours when the last few winter cabbages are only fit for the compost heap. The first mint, sorrel and tarragon leaves show life is returning to the garden, so it's no surprise that herbs have played such a prominent part in spring festivals, like Easter.

Throughout Easter Sunday, these herbs come to the fore. Some years ago, our family day started with egg rolling, usually duck and sometimes hen. A double yoked goose was even possible. This was followed by an egg feast, spiced up with herbs. The fresh, lemony tang of sorrel, *Rumex acetosa*, is always a winner; it must once have been so welcome when everyone had had to rely on dried and stored veg for months.

Chives, *Allium schoenoprasum*, are survivors too, and do well when chopped over egg mayonnaise; they're much tougher than French tarragon, *Artemisia dracunculoides*, which does need some protection over the winter. Luckily, tarragon thrives in a pot, so there's always space in my greenhouse for it and, like all container-grown plants, it appreciates a dressing of home-made compost to get going. I went a step further a few weeks ago by sparing it some of my precious wormcast.

Parsley, *Petroselinum crispum*, also enhances an egg dish so be sure to collect the first new leaves of last summer's sowing as soon as they appear. Because it's a biennial, parsley will try to rush to seed, so we're faced with the pleasant task of slowing this down by picking leaves as they form. Parsley plants are readily available at garden centres, but are easy to grow on from seed, despite their reputation to the contrary. The Romans seemingly started this rumour, believing that the seed had to go to and from the devil 7 times before it would germinate. The seed would have had to make fewer journeys if it had been kept at a nice, steady temperature, of 15°C - 25°C.

Some writers have suggested that parsley is also prone to attack by the fungal disease, damping off, but I have never found this. It is true that parsley seed hates wet conditions so would fail in peat-based compost, but it does well enough in soil-based ones and loves my home-made compost mixes. A lot of nonsense is talked about nasty pathogens lurking in the compost heap, all primed to attack our helpless seedlings: never in 30 years has that happened in my garden.

Other spring herbs have no reputation for being tricky, quite the reverse. Horseradish, *Armoracia rusticana*, survives any winter and will take over an area, given the opportunity. When a plant has the label 'horse' attached, it's generally thought to be large, coarse and fairly irrepressible, but provided you dig up horseradish roots and divide a clump every 2 or 3 years, you should keep it roughly under control. The secure alternative is to corral horseradish in a very deep container.

This tough survivor plays a key part in another festival, Pesach, the Jewish Feast of the Passover. In this celebration of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt, the Seder Plate contains 6 symbolic foods, and one is horseradish, a bitter herb representing the bitterness of their time in Egypt.

Horseradish is hot and spicy as well as bitter, and makes a delightful sauce with herring at the end of Lent. Another equally thuggish herb accompanies Easter Sunday's roast lamb: mint. At the same time as horseradish roots start sprouting small leaves, mint stems begin to appear; don't worry if you pick all the tiny little shoots of spearmint or round leafed mint as they'll be

replaced almost before you reach the kitchen. This herb takes no prisoners as it would colonise the whole garden all too readily, so it must be contained, either in a pot or a restricted space. I have a plastic membrane vertically sunk to a depth of 45cm round the mint bed and this works perfectly. And back to the mint sauce, try ginger mint as a tasty alternative flavour.

Given how bare lots of herb gardens are in spring, every piece of edible greenery is highly prized, certainly judging by the vast distances my geese will travel for a single blade of grass. But one home-grown green to accompany roast could be nettles. While they're still small, they can be cooked like spinach and if, like me, you admit to having some nettles in the garden, don a pair of rubber gloves and pick the top 6 or 8 leaves of any stems. You might even go a step further. In Walter Scott's 'Rob Roy', a Scots gardener claimed that forcing nettles was common practice among his fellow countrymen: "nae doubt I should understand my trade of horticulture, seeing I was bred in the parish of Dreepdaily, where they raise lang-kale under glass, and force the early nettles for their spring kale." I'm sure his tongue was firmly in his cheek as he regaled his gullible visitor.