

Should you make room for Rumex?

Have you ever tasted spring sorrel soup? If not, you haven't lived!

Have you ever encountered that insidious weed, dock, in your garden? Lucky you, if you haven't!

Have you ever dabbled in natural dyes? If so, you may have used the roots, seeds or leaves of dock to achieve shades of deep yellow, gold, red or dark green.

Do you scout nurseries, plant shows and sales in early spring, looking for something unusual to plant? Perhaps you've seen or even purchased Bloody or Red-veined dock. Many gardeners succumb to this plant early in the year, because it's "cute" and colorful.

The sorrel that makes the soup unique, the weed that makes you cry, the source of the dye, and the plant with the decorative foliage are all species of *Rumex*. A branch of the Buckwheat family (Polygonaceae), *Rumex* has its cultivated members as well as its black sheep.



Rumex crispus

Among the *Rumex* considered worthy of cultivation are two species of sorrel commonly grown in perennial herb gardens:

Rumex acetosa (sorrel, common sorrel, garden sorrel, sour dock, spinach dock)

Plants of this species form foliage clumps with three-foot-long leafy stems. Fresh young leaves are added to salads, sauces, soups, cream cheese and egg dishes, or pureed to add color and acidity to mayonnaise. The juice is used to remove rust, mold, and ink stains from linen, wood, silver, and wicker. The deep roots of this herb may make it difficult to eradicate once it is well established.

Rumex scutatus (French sorrel, buckler-leaf sorrel, garden sorrel)

Plants of this species have a sprawling habit, reaching a height of eighteen inches or so. The leaves are used in the same way as those of *Rumex acetosa*, and are often preferred because of their lower acidity, less bitterness, and more definite lemony flavor. *Rumex scutatus* 'Silver Shield' is a variant. *Rumex scutatus* is hardy to -10 degrees F, and does not require the same level of moisture as *Rumex acetosa* in order to survive. It is considered by some gardeners to be invasive.

Sorrel is a staple in French cooking (under the name *oseille*) and in eastern European and Jewish cuisines (*schav*). It tastes like a sharp, sprightly spinach, but is a much better performer in the garden than spinach. A

perennial, it will bear for many years. In areas of very mild winters, it produces leaves year round; where the ground freezes, plants go dormant in winter but are among the first perennials to revive in late winter or early spring.

Sorrel seed may be started indoors or planted directly in the garden as early in the spring as possible. Plants thrive in ordinary good garden soil and will tolerate more shade than most vegetables; moderate acidity and fairly high nitrogen levels are ideal. Sow sorrel seed one- quarter to one-half inch deep in rows 18 inches apart. Germination takes a week or two. Thin seedlings to stand four inches apart if the intent is to have young leaves for salads; eight to ten inches apart, for substantial herb plants with heavier harvests. About four months after thinning, one can usually make the first harvest. Occasional light feeding will increase leaf growth. Routine deep watering is necessary for a good leaf crop. Pull off old yellow leaves and pinch flower stalks to encourage leaf production and to prevent rampant reseeding. Good reasons to leave flower stalks: to dry them for flower arrangements or to use in dyeing; or to feed the finches. Weak, crowded plants may be dug and divided in spring. Replant the divisions in enriched soil. Letting one or two flower stalks go to seed and transplanting the seedlings elsewhere in the garden is an equally good strategy for replacing spent plants. In either case, amend the soil where the sorrel was growing, as the herb tends to deplete the nutrients where it grows.

Harvest sorrel from substantial-sized plants by pulling or snapping some outer leaves from the plant. Before using sorrel, clean it well. If the stem and center rib are tough, tear them off. The lemony tang of sorrel makes it a good replacement for lettuce leaves in sandwiches. A little bit of sorrel can go a long, long way, however; so start with small amounts, taste, and add more as your palate indicates. Finely shredded or chopped sorrel is good in tacos, tostadas, omelets, and gazpacho. A classic recipe for using sorrel is a creamy soup served cold. Add a few sorrel leaves to green salads; cook shredded sorrel in butter and use it on baked potatoes, on poached fish, or blend it into soups.

The [Epicurious](#) website provides two recipes for soups which include sorrel. Search for **sorrel soup**.

Now, how about the weedy *Rumex*? Native to Eurasia, they are commonly found in the western United States in wet meadows, along ditch banks, and in waste areas. Herb books may refer to various medicinal uses for the weedy *Rumex* species. Most contain oxalates, similar to those found in spinach and rhubarb. Oxalates are poisonous if used in excess, especially for persons with a tendency to rheumatism, arthritis, gout, kidney stones and hyper acidity. Oxalates are also acidic, which may affect sensitive teeth.

Rumex acetosella (Red sorrel, sheep sorrel)

Red sorrel, *Rumex acetosella*, can be found in lawns, fields, gardens and along roadsides. Although it is associated with acid soils, it has apparently adapted to other types of soil and growing conditions.

Rumex crispus (Curly dock, sour dock, yellow dock)

Dock is found throughout Washington and Oregon, where it is generally considered a noxious weed. The vegetable gardener who tills without first carefully removing the entire roots of this robust, tap-rooted plant, ends up multiplying the number of plants which will need to be eradicated. Likewise, the gardener who allows this plant to form seed stalks (which can reach a height of five feet), guarantees a continuing supply of dock for years to come. The seeds come packaged ready to be carried by wind or water, in a papery, sometimes corky, winged structure about an eighth of an inch long or slightly longer.

Not everyone despises dock. Flower arrangers gather the spikes of brown seeds to use in dry arrangements. Weavers gather the plant at varying stages, depending on the color they hope to obtain by using it as a dye. Using alum as a mordant, fresh green leaves and stems give a beige color; ripe, reddish-brown seeds (usually available mid-summer) produce a medium brown; and ripe seeds stored until winter result in a rich gold, which some describe as bright and brassy. Use of different mordants (chrome, copper, tin, iron) gives different results (rust, ochre, orange, a dark grey-green).

Rumex obtusifolius (Broadleaf dock)

Broadleaf dock has broader leaves and one to three spines on the wing structure of the fruit.

Last but not least, is a sorrel grown chiefly for its ornamental value.

Rumex sanguineus (Bloody or Red-veined dock)

In early spring, it's a charming little thing in a four-inch pot: the somewhat oval green leaves have prominent red veining. Soon the leaves grow longer and more pointed, showing much more resemblance to the leaves of the other *Rumex* species. The plants are prone to slug and snail damage, rust, smut, and leaf spots. If their appearance becomes altogether too shabby, they can be cut back and given a second chance to be truly ornamental.

Bloody or Red-veined dock is not quite as hardy as some of its relatives. The American Horticultural Society recommends growing it in USDA zones 6-8. It can achieve a height of three feet and a breadth of a foot. It self-seeds if it is not deadheaded. Grow it in an herbaceous or mixed border in moderately fertile, well-drained soil in full sun. Although one can find recommendations that it be eaten, AHS reminds us that ingesting any part of a dock may cause mild stomach upset, and contact with the foliage may irritate skin. (We know that you are just itching to find out where you can obtain this plant, aren't you?!!!!)

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