

### *Capsella bursa-pastoris*

[Synonyms : *Bursa bursa-pastoris*, *Bursa bursa-pastoris* var. *bifida*, *Bursa gracilis*, *Capsella bursa* subsp. *pastoris*, *Capsella hyrcana*, *Capsella rubella*, *Thlaspi bursa-pastoris*]

**SHEPHERD’S-PURSE** is an annual (occasionally biennial). Native to Europe it has tiny white flowers.

It is also known as Bad man’s oatmeal, *Beursje* (Dutch), Blindweed, *Bolsa de pastor* (Spanish), *Bolsa do pastor* (Portuguese), *Borsa di pastore* (Italian), *Borsapastore comune* (Italian), *Bourse* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Bourse à Judas* (French), *Bourse à Pasteur* (French), *Bourse de capucin* (French), *Capselle à Pasteur* (French), *Capselle bourse à Pasteur* (French), Case-weed, Casewort, Chinese cress, *Clappedepouch* (Irish Gaelic), Cocowort, Common shepherd’s purse, *Coratente* (Nepalese), Crowpecks, *Erva do bom pastor* (Portuguese), Fat hen, *Fleur de St. Jacques* (French), *Gargir il-gemel* (Maltese), Gentleman’s purse, *Gemeine Hirtentäschelkraut* (German), *Gewöhnliches Hirtentäschel* (German), *Gewoon herderstasje* (Dutch), Guns, Hen pepper, Hens and chickens, *Herders tasje* (Dutch), *Herderstassie* (Afrikaans), *Hirtentäschchen* (German), *Hirtentäschel* (German), *Hirtentäschelkraut* (German), *Hyrdetaske* (Danish), *Ji* (Chinese), *Ji cai* (Chinese), *Kapsička pastierska* (Slovak), *Kokoška pastuší tobolka* (Czech), Lady’s purse, *Ling jiao cai* (Chinese), *Lomme* (Swedish), *Lommeört* (Swedish), *Lutukka* (Finnish), *Mastuerzo* (Spanish), *Molette à berger* (French), Money bags, Mother’s heart, *Naeng-i* (Korean), Naughty man’s plaything, *Nazuna* (Japanese), Old woman’s bonnet, *Paniquesillo* (Spanish), *Pan y quesito blanco* (Spanish), *Pastierska kapsička obyčajná* (Slovak), *Penpen gusa* (Japanese), Pepper and salt, Pepper and shot, Pepper grass, Pepper plant, Pepper weed, Pickpocket, Pickpocket to London, Pick-cup purse, Pickpurse, Pick-your-mother’s-heart-out, *Pi d'mouissaon* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), Poor man’s parmacettie, Poor man’s pharmaceutical, Poor man’s purse, Poverty purse, Purseflower, *Pwrs y Bugail* (Welsh), Rattle pouches, Rifle the ladies’ purses, Sack of the priest, St. James’ weed, Sanguinary, *Seisai* (Japanese), *Shamisen gusa* (Japanese), *Shepaazupaasu* (Japanese), Shepard’s bag, Shepard’s pouch, Shepard’s purse, Shepherd’s bag, Shepherd’s heart, Shepherd’s pedlar, Shepherd’s pocket, Shepherd’s pouch, Shepherd’s scrip, Shepherd’s sprout, Shovelweed, Snake flower, Stony-in-the-wall, Tacker weed, *Täschelkraut* (German), Toothwort, *Torii ghaans* (Nepalese), Toy weed, Toywort, Windflower, Witch’s pouches, and *Zurrón de pastor* (Spanish); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ‘I offer you my all’.

The plant flowers and fruits throughout the year, and one plant can produce as many as 50,000 seeds annually – seeds that can remain viable for several years.

Warning – it is alleged by some that shepherd’s-purse can be poisonous.

*Bursa-pastoris* means ‘shepherd’s-purse’ with reference to the shape of the fruit and the purses or pouches that used to be worn hanging from the belt by cord or string.

Those purses or pouches are reflected in most of the common names adopted throughout Europe.

The reason for a couple of the common names is of particular interest. The amount of space the plant can take up on valuable land is said to have led to the name Pickpocket. While *Clappedepouch* is an Irish name that refers to the lepers who were often called ‘rattle-

pouches' and were licensed to beg. They carried a bell or clapper and a brass cup on the end of a long pole (for alms) and would often be found waiting at crossroads.

The Norsemen introduced the plant to Greenland in the late 9<sup>th</sup> Century and, to this day, it can still be found in the same place that it was originally planted.

A superstition associated particularly with northern England claimed that if you opened the pod and found yellow seeds you would be rich and if they were green you would be poor.

A sad little game that used to be played by some European children, including the English and the Germans, relies on the easily broken seed cases. A child is urged to choose one of several seed cases and as soon as this breaks is told that he has broken his mother's heart.

In some parts of Europe the root has been used as a hot-tasting flavouring and the seeds have been ground for bread flour. Shepherd's-purse, both wild and cultivated (the latter in China), has provided a green vegetable in several Asian countries. Koreans eat the boiled leaves with a special sauce and buy the wild plant complete with its long white tap root. It seems to have attracted particular popularity in China during the reign of the Sung dynasty (960-1279) when it was an ingredient in a traditional soup – and today it can still be found for sale in markets in southern China. In the West the tender young leaves can be added to salad, sautéed or steamed and used as an ingredient in sauces, soups and stews.

One of its fascinating qualities, shared with only a few other plants, is that it is believed to be slightly radioactive when fresh. It is contended by some people therefore that shepherd's-purse can help to relieve pain purely by its touch on the afflicted area.

In veterinary medicine it was used to treat calves for purging. The seeds are enjoyed by caged and wild birds, particularly chaffinches.

Many of the North American Indian tribes absorbed shepherd's-purse into their diet. For the Mendocino Indians the seeds were a staple food, whereas for some of the Apache tribe they provided flavouring. The Cherokee also used shepherd's-purse as a spice – and like the Cahuilla, some of the Apache and the Thompson tribes they ate the leaves as a vegetable. Some of the Apache also ground the dried seeds for bread-flour.

The North American Menominee Indian tribe, and no doubt others, believed that a wash with the infused liquid obtained from steeping shepherd's-purse in water was a particularly valuable remedy for poison ivy sores. The Chippewa and Mohican Indians used the plant to treat some stomach disorders, and the former together with the Mahuna and Costanoan tribes used it especially as a remedy for dysentery. The Mahuna seem to have found the plant useful for treating diarrhoea and the Meskwaki tribe also used it. The Mohicans prescribed it for expelling worms. Chippewa Indians used the leaves in remedies for headaches.

Apparently shepherd's-purse played a significant role in genetic research earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century at Princeton University, New Jersey in the United States. This was carried out under Professor George H. Shull (1874-1954) and focussed on the principles underlying hybrid corn development.

Shepherd's-purse is used commercially in cosmetic preparations, proprietary medicines and homoeopathic remedies.

It was one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1<sup>st</sup> Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithridaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition.

Medicinally, herbalists used shepherd's-purse for stemming internal bleeding, as well as for healing wounds. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when alternative commercial products were no longer available in Germany during the 1st World War, extracts of the plant were used to

stop wounds bleeding. It has also been used in the treatment of ear problems, piles, diarrhoea, dysentery, rheumatic ailments, urinal disorders, haemorrhages, period problems, kidney complaints and fluid retention. [At one time it was thought to be useful in curing jaundice if the plant was tied to the wrists and the soles of the feet.]