

Nasturtium officinale

[Synonyms : *Cardamine officinale*, *Nasturtium aquaticum*, *Nasturtium fontanum*, *Nasturtium nasturtium-aquaticum*, *Nasturtium officinale* var. *sifolium*, *Nasturtium palustre*, *Radicula nasturtium-aquaticum*, *Roripa nasturtium*, *Rorippa microphylla*, *Rorippa nasturtium*, *Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum*, *Rorippa officinale*, *Sisymbrium nasturtium*, *Sisymbrium nasturtium-aquaticum*]

WATERCRESS is an evergreen aquatic perennial. Native to Europe it has tiny white flowers. It is also known as *Akvokreso* (Esperanto), Bank cress, Berro (English, Spanish), *Berro di agua* (Spanish), *Berros* (Spanish), *Berwr y Dŵr* (Welsh), Bilders, Bittercress, *Brahmi-sag* (Hindi), Broffin cress, Brook cress, Brooklime, Brown cress, *Brunnekress* (German), Carpenter's chips, Common watercress, Crashes, Creese, *Crescione* (Italian), *Crescione di fonte* (Italian), Cress, *Cresson* (French), *Cresson au poulet* (French), *Cresson de fontaine* (French), *Echte Brunnenkresse* (German), Flixweed, Fluxweed, *Gemeine Brunnenkresse* (German), Hedge mustard, *Isovesikrassi* (Finnish), *Kakutu-pala* (Sinhalese), *Källfräne* (Swedish), *Källkrasse* (Swedish), *Kenchi* (Javanese), Kerse, *Kerson* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Kreson* (Creole), *Krexuni Sija* (Maltese), *Mararia* (Kikuyu), *Nasilord* (French), *Nero cardamom* (Greek), Pepperleaf, Peppergrass, *Potočnica lekárska* (Slovak), *Potočnice lékařská* (Czech), *Řeřišnice potoční* (Czech), Rib, *Rohtonenätti* (Finnish), *Sai yeung tsoi* (Chinese), *Salada chai* (Sundanese), Scurvy grass, *Selada ayer* (Malay), Sturshum, Tall nasturtium, Tang-tongues, Teng-tongue, Tongue grass, True watercress, *Vattenkrasse* (Swedish), *Wataressa* (Sinhalese), Water crashes, Water grass, *Waterkers* (Dutch), Water plant, Water radish, Water salad, Water-sweet-Alice, Well cress, Well girse, Well-karse, and Well-kerse; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of power, and stability.

The seeds are often distributed by water birds.

The flowers are pollinated by various insects including bees, and flies.

Warning – wild watercress can be host to the poisonous liver-fluke found most often where sheep graze. Medicinally the plant should not be taken excessively or for a long period (up to 4 weeks only, even with interruption) as it can cause kidney disorders. Undiluted juice can cause throat and stomach inflammations. Some believe it should be avoided in pregnancy and it may also be unsuitable for sufferers of thyroid disorders.

Officinale means 'of the shop (usually the apothecary's or herbalist's)'. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

Watercress with chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*), crab apple (*Malus baccata*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* var. *dulce*), greater plantain (*Plantago major*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*), thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) and wood betony (*Stachys officinalis*) was one of the Nine Sacred Herbs for the Anglo-Saxons. (Some authorities believe that the ninth could have been sainfoin, *Onobrychis viciifolia*.) They believed that the plants could give protection against evil.

It was used as a strewing herb.

If traditional stories are to be believed the Greek historian and military commander, Xenophon (c.435-354) who early in his career served as a Greek mercenary under the Persian

prince, Cyrus the Younger (424-401 BC) is said to have promoted watercress among the Persians he met at that time. It was a familiar plant to both the ancient Greeks and the Romans and the latter are understood to have considered it as a desirable part of diets for the mentally ill.

Both medicinal and aromatic qualities of watercress (probably collected from the wild) were recognized by the Romans and it has been cultivated in northern Europe, particularly France and the Netherlands, for centuries. It seems that the first commercial watercress beds to be established in England only made their appearance in Kent in about 1808. More are said to have followed quite quickly in the counties surrounding London for which they primarily catered. Some of the track of the old railway lines that was laid specifically to carry the fresh plant to the metropolis from places further afield still exists. One example is that from Arlesford in Hampshire where watercress beds are still thriving and the line is familiarly known today as the 'Watercress Line'.

In Britain many used to believe that watercress should not be harvested when there was an 'R' in the month. This in effect excluded the Summer months and authorities seem to be of two minds as to whether it was explained by the fact that wild watercress flowers then – or that at that time water levels could be lower and the water less free-flowing which might lead to a dirty crop.

Although today the leaves are familiar as a salad and flavouring they used to be cooked like spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*) even as recently as the 1930s.

Fishermen are said to welcome watercress especially in trout streams as it attracts many of the creatures the fish feed upon. Watercress is also much enjoyed by ducks.

Unusually for a salad plant watercress has heraldic connections. (If one overlooks the illogicality as it ignores the fact that watercress grows in running water the following tale is delightful.) The story goes that while out hunting in the Summer heat in the countryside north-west of Paris the French king, Louis IX (otherwise known as St. Louis) (1215-1270) became desperate for a drink. He was offered watercress to quench his thirst (as it is said that no liquid was near) and was so pleased by its refreshing taste that he wanted to commemorate the little plant and the place where it was found. Coincidentally or not the French city of Vernon claims that its coat of arms dates back to the 13th Century and this contains three bunches of watercress.

At some point the plant reached North America and there it came to be known by several North American Indian tribes. The Cherokee, Havasupai, Okanagan-Colville, some of the Algonkin, the Saanich, Diegueño, Luiseño, Gosiute, Cahuilla, Tubatulabal, Kawaiisu, Iroquois and Karok tribes all ate it as a vegetable particularly in salads. The Mendocino Indian tribe viewed it more as a relish, and records suggest that the Okanagan-Colville relied upon it especially as a famine food. It was also a source of medicine for several tribes. Apparently the Okanagan-Colville applied it fresh to the forehead in poultices to ease both headaches and dizziness. Both the Mahuna and Costanoan Indians valued it for treating liver problems, and the latter also used it to ease fever and kidney disorders.

Watercress is prized by the cosmetics industry as it can help to make the skin smooth and white – and it can be an ingredient in bath gels.

The juice is used by the tobacco industry as a nicotine solvent.

Medicinally, countries identify a wide range of differently valued qualities that include a remedy for asthma and scurvy, and use as a contraceptive, purgative and aphrodisiac. It is also said to have gained a reputation in bygone days for being able to alleviate a hangover. Watercress is a rich source of Vitamins A and C as well as beta-carotene. It is understood that the American Cancer Society believes that a diet consisting of a high content of plants that contain beta-carotene can assist in reducing the risk of contracting some forms of cancer. The plant is used in proprietary medicines today.

It is the birthday flower for 24th September.