

IN POLITE SOCIETY, watercress has long been an important ingredient of afternoon tea, perhaps with sliced hard-boiled egg in perfectly cut sandwiches. This crunchy vegetable is a real taste of summer and a link to times gone by.

It is today, however, much more freely available than ever before, due to supermarkets selling it as prepacked salad which allows it to be transported more easily and kept fresh for longer. Thanks to its peppery yet fresh taste, it has a wide range of applications. Well-known for its use raw in salads, it is also great cooked in tasty soups, stews and stir-fries; it can even be blended into smoothies.

Quick to grow, watercress can be cropped many times throughout its long growing season. It is a nutritious vegetable and a rich source of many vitamins and minerals. It is especially rich in vitamin C and magnesium, and also contains several antioxidants such as beta-carotene, thought by some to help prevent cancer.

A long history

Nasturtium officinale is one of two wild species of watercress that can be found growing in streams throughout much of Europe, including the UK; as such it is one of few British native vegetables. The other species, *N. microphyllum*, is less often grown as a crop.

A perennial member of the brassica family, which includes mustard and rocket, watercress has been grown since Roman times; indeed it is believed to be one of the oldest leaf vegetables consumed by man. Eating it was supposed to prevent baldness, and Roman emperors thought it helped them make important decisions.

It was first cultivated commercially in Britain in 1808 near Gravesend. It is now grown mainly in Hampshire and Dorset; the centre of current cultivation in the UK is Alresford, near Winchester, which is sometimes known as the watercress capital of Britain. The cress is particularly successful in this area due to underlying



Hand-cutting watercress results in attractive bunches but is highly labour intensive

Watery wonderleaves

Watercress is a versatile and nutritious leafy vegetable. Mary Maher uncovers its origins and finds it is easy to grow at home. Photography by Tim Sandall



COMMERCIAL WATERCRESS (left to right): Using a roller to encourage the young plants to root to the bottom of the cress bed; hand-cutting involves grabbing a handful of watercress and cutting it with a knife; hand-cut bunches of watercress are bound with a rubber band and sent to markets in trays

chalk bedrock. Water from natural springs rises up through layers of chalk, absorbing a high level of nutrients, which is passed onto the watercress as it grows. Commercial production increased after the railway came to Alresford in 1865, as it became possible to quickly transport freshly harvested watercress to markets in London and other cities.

Importance of clean water

Appealing as the idea may be, never eat wild watercress. Besides potential errors in identifying the plant, a big concern is liver fluke, a parasitic flatworm found in sheep and cattle. The worm has a life cycle partly carried out in streams and ponds. After hatching, its larvae target water snails as an intermediate host, before forming a cyst on foliage of water plants, including watercress. If eaten, the resulting flatworms, up to 3.5cm (1 3/8 in) long, can cause severe health problems. However, this pest is only found close to where livestock graze, and early last century growers agreed measures that completely eliminated the incidence of

liver fluke from commercial cultivation. The code of practice of the National Farmers' Union Watercress Association requires that watercress must only be grown in pure spring water, that beds must have impervious sides to eliminate the risk of contamination, and that production beds must be protected from the intrusion of livestock.

Commercial growing

Family-run Chalke Valley Watercress has been growing watercress in Wiltshire since 1880. The site consists of natural springs and boreholes that channel the water across 24 individual beds. Around the perimeter, there are separate drainage channels that prevent field and road run-off contaminating the cress beds. The harvest season starts at the end of January or early February, and continues through to the end of November.

New plants are grown from seed each year. Seed is sown in a polytunnel on a layer of compost on the concrete floor. A fortnight later, the young plants are moved to the cress beds, and five to six

WINTER CRESS

Similar in taste to watercress, *Barbarea verna* (winter cress or land cress) is a biennial or short-lived perennial in the brassica family, growing in the wild in damp sites, but not needing running water. Cultivated since the 17th century, it is hardy and can be sown in September for a winter harvest, or in a glasshouse in January. A variegated selection is also available.



weeks later they are cropped; subsequent crops can be taken four weeks later. A new batch is started in the tunnel every two weeks until August.

Water levels in the beds are controlled according to the age of the crop, so that it is never too deep for the plants. A ►

‘IT IS PERFECTLY POSSIBLE TO CULTIVATE WATERCRESS FOR CROPPING IN CONTAINERS OF COMPOST SO LONG AS IT IS KEPT CONSTANTLY MOIST’

wooden roller is hand pulled across the bed to encourage young plants to root to the bottom.

The flowing spring water maintains an even temperature of 10°C throughout winter, and allows a longer growing season. During cold spells, the cress is pressed down with a flat, slatted ‘patter’ to keep the plants close to the water surface. At the end of the growing season, the plants are allowed to flower, and seed is collected for use the following year. Beds are then cleaned out and the old plants are placed on a compost heap,

where they quickly rot down.

The water on the Chalke Valley site, although high in many nutrients, is deficient in phosphate. This is added to the water and the patter is used to knock the coarse powder off the leaves, so that they do not burn. Pest and disease problems are few, and are controlled by good husbandry and hygiene, for no pesticides are used; if there is an aphid or flea beetle infestation, for example, the bed is cleaned out and the crop dumped. Pigeons occasionally nibble at the edges of the beds, and ducks only cause problems in the coldest weather.

Harvesting

Each year, Chalke Valley harvests 50–70 tonnes of watercress. Traditionally, it was hand-cut, a skilled operation that involves cutting handfuls of the plant with a sharp knife. This is then taken to the packing shed to be bunched and boxed for the wholesale market and sold on to restaurants and retailers. Hand-cutting, however, means bending low, which can cause health problems.

Harvesting is now mainly carried out by much-quicker mechanical harvesters. Loose watercress is packed in bags for wholesalers. The bags contain some moisture and are also filled with air, which gives the cut watercress a much longer shelf life and protects it during transportation. Some of the crop is sold to processors who wash and bag it with mixed salads for the supermarket trade.

A British crop

While we are all being made aware of ‘food miles’ and eating what is in season, it is good to know that British watercress is available for most of the year, and you can also grow it at home (see box, right). It will take up little space and provides a fresh crop over a long season. Being able to harvest some fresh, peppery leaves for a healthy sandwich, from outside your back door, is a satisfying and tasty experience. Once you have enjoyed these flavoursome leaves, it will be hard to resist finding as many uses as possible for this native British vegetable. ■

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Keith Hitchings, owner of Chalke Valley Watercress, with a patter, one of the tools of watercress production



The crops of watercress showing different stages of growth, at Chalke Valley Watercress in Broad Chalke, Wiltshire

Suppliers include: Thompson & Morgan, 0844 248 5383; www.thompson-morgan.com; ● Marshalls, 01480 443390; www.marshalls-seeds.co.uk

Further information: For more information on watercress and recipes, visit www.watercress.co.uk

● With special thanks to Keith Hitchings of Chalke Valley Watercress, wholesale growers of Broad Chalke, Wiltshire. Visit: www.chalkevalleywatercress.co.uk ● See more photographs of watercress production at Chalke Valley on RHS Online: www.rhs.org.uk/learning/publications/pubs/garden0609/watercress.htm

GROWING WATERCRESS AT HOME

It used to be that said running water was essential to grow safe, healthy watercress, and indeed you should not eat cress that has been grown in garden ponds or anywhere that water snails may live (see p407). However it is perfectly possible to cultivate plants for cropping in containers of compost (right) so long as it is kept constantly moist – the pots may be stood in trays of water.

Growing from seed

Several companies sell watercress seed. Watercress ‘Aqua’ is one selection and should be sown from mid-spring for harvesting throughout summer, although some companies say it can be harvested year-round, except when frozen. Simply snip off topmost shoots with kitchen scissors – the plant regrows quickly from below. Always wash watercress thoroughly before eating.

Starting from cuttings

Alternatively, bags of watercress purchased in the supermarket can also be used to grow plants – sometimes the shoots already have roots forming. If not, cut off long, healthy shoots and place these into a container of water; the plants will quickly produce roots and start growing new shoots. Pot these up in moist compost and treat as mature plants.



WATERCRESS FROM MR FOTHERGILL'S, POT BY DEROMA