

Not just a bit on the side

You probably have your winter salad leaves well under way by now, but if you want to bump up your greens, the most nutritious, fastest-growing and delicious crop to try is watercress.

I popped over to a friend's house the other day and was most impressed by her efforts. Claire had installed a stone trough under a tap that was fitted with a regulator. A slow drip of water (like a tap with a washer that has only just started to go) plopped into the water and this was her watercress bed. I had always thought copious running water was needed and was interested to discover otherwise.

Christine Walkden, horticulturist and broadcaster, grows her own too, "but just in a washing-up bowl outside" – she doesn't even have the drippy tap and finds she has enough for her needs.

Watercress commonly grows in the wild. It is a hardy perennial herb (*Nasturtium officinale*) and will grow in wet

BUNNY GUINNESS

HOW TO MAKE SURE YOU GET YOUR SHARE OF GREENS WITH WATERCRESS



soil and in ditches. We have a supply growing prolifically in a natural pool that sits in our field, just by the spring line. It grows all year round, presumably because the constant temperature of the water (around 11C/52F) keeps it warm. We don't eat it, though, as my Soay sheep and cows drink there and there is a risk of it being contaminated with liver fluke.

Edward Scales from Hairspring Watercress (www.hairspring.org.uk) has several acres of it growing on a natural spring source. Edward and his company grow their plants from their own seed (pollinated by their bees). It is easily grown from cuttings, though – just put some on the windowsill in water and it will root rapidly – or seeds are available from Thompson & Morgan (www.thompson-morgan.com).

Claire and Christine will selectively remove a few sprigs when they need them, ensuring they always have a



small, permanent supply, except when it runs to flower. When this happens, the taste gets very strong.

In the commercial situation, at flowering they will cut the plant hard back, then knock them with wooden rakes to root and produce more plants. At home, you can just pop in a few more cuttings and put the old plant on the compost heap.

The best watercress grows

in spring and autumn and is a plant that spreads exceptionally fast.

It grows in running water that arises from chalk and limestone soils, which provide its necessary calcium nutrients.

You can grow it in a big pot with a saucer (kept topped up with water), in an artificial bog garden, or just in moist soil.

Apparently, quite a few gardeners grow their own watercress in all sorts of containers and ponds. Tom Amery, the managing director for the Watercress Company, points out if you are happy to drink the pond water, knowing it is safe, then the watercress will be fine to eat.

Changing the water frequently so you do not let it become stagnant or having some sort of constant flow is necessary. You may need to add some fertiliser, too.

Tom also recommends planting some plants in ponds with algal blooms, as the



Rich harvest: watercress, left, grows throughout the year; make it into a soup, far left, to supplement your winter greens

watercress will take out the nutrients – but don't eat this! Nutritionally, watercress has been a winner for some time – it's more than just a garnish on the side. The Watercress Company started the annual Watercress Festival, which attracts around 12,000 visitors and brings together such foodie delights as watercress beer, bread and scones, on its farm in May.

Watercress was grown and eaten in London in Victorian times, as it provided a highly nutritious source of greens available throughout the year and was responsible for keeping scurvy at bay. It was also known as "poor man's sandwiches" as when there was no money for bread, people would simply eat the watercress filling and with good reason, as it is higher in vitamin C than oranges. Now, the likes of Liz Hurley swear by the watercress diet to keep them trim and healthy.

Dr Steve Rothwell studied watercress for his PhD and now advises Vitacress (www.vitacress.com) on its



SIMILAR-FLAVOURED HERBS TO TRY

1 Nasturtium (above) tastes

similar to watercress and the leaves, flowers and seed are edible, the seeds often pickled to form a caper substitute.

2 Landcress *Barbarea verna*

(www.thompson-morgan.com) This looks like watercress and has a peppery taste. It grows in many soils from



seed and just needs to be cut back regularly to produce more leaves. There is a variegated form too.

3 Cress 'Extra Curled'

Lepidium sativum (centre) Can be grown on a window sill on paper towels and eaten within 10-12 days.



4 Cress Polycress, (T & M) a hardy annual, easy to grow.

health benefits. Apparently watercress is rich in isothiocyanates and phenethyl isothiocyanates, compounds which have been found to have high anti-cancer properties. Rothwell suggests having watercress for one of your five a day, five times a week. Quickly wilt it and add to a pasta sauce if you find that amount of foliage a challenge to chop.

According to the Nutrition Density Index (which ranges from 0-1,000) it scores 1,000, around five times greater than another superfood, the pomegranate.

If you want to supplement your home-grown leaves, watercress can be grown from cuttings now. You could then grow it on in a pot and wet saucer or trough, placing it in a shady place or frost-free greenhouse. It will stay green down to about -3 or -4C (27/25F) – unless it is in warmer spring water. It does not like summer heat, and if it's too warm or there is not enough nutrition, it will start to form aerial roots from the stem and look spindly.

Have a go at growing it; you might not produce enough to eat 80g a day (for one of your five fruit or veg), but there should easily be enough to spice up a salad, soup or pasta dish.