

The springtime gift of sorrel

The perennial plant's tightly furled leaves emerge in March, pushing aside wintry desolation.

by [Terra Brockman](#) in the [March 14, 2018](#) issue



Sorrel plants. Photo by Terra Brockman.

Farmers and gardeners will tell you: “Spring is all about waiting for dry soil.” And that’s mostly true. Tractors and tillers do not work well in wet soil because they create lumps and clumps that become rock-hard when the soil dries. Even when farmers plant by hand, the muddy ground makes it difficult for the plant’s roots to make their way down into the soil and for the cotyledons to force their way up.

But I’m tucking into the first fresh greens of the season while the world is still mud-luscious—long before any tilling, planting, weeding, or mulching takes place. For me, spring is not about waiting for dry soil but about waiting for sorrel.

And I don't have long to wait. While farmers and gardeners are sharpening tools or repairing machinery, I make my way down the wooded hillside to the patch of perennials that my brother Henry has near the stream. In between rows of rhubarb and chives is the well-mulched sorrel patch, where the needle points of tightly furled sorrel leaves will soon pierce the cold and still-sodden soil. Although it's likely that those first leaves will be zapped by freezing temperatures, that won't faze these vigorous plants.

Like most perennials, sorrel needs little tending once it's well established, and it can handle just about any weather. Because of their deep taproots, sorrel plants are able to survive floods and droughts. Give the plants some mulch to keep the weeds down and to provide nourishment, and they will give back in more ways than you might imagine.

It is usually in March that I spy the first growth poking out of the ground, sometimes even coming through the snow. That early sight of green always thrills me—it's an indication of life pulsing below the surface, bursting forth, and pushing aside wintry desolation. It brings to mind these lines by the 11th-century waka poet Fujiwara no Ietaka:

To those who only pray for the cherries to bloom,
How I wish to show the spring
that gleams from a pack of green
In the midst of the snow-covered mountain village.

A day or two after the sorrel needles emerge, the leaves unfurl. A week or so later they are four or more inches long, big enough so that I can grab a handful and take them into my kitchen. Sorrel has a bright, tangy lemon or green apple flavor. If you prefer the milder side of sorrel, simply cook it and use it in soups or omelets. Either way, it provides high levels of vitamins A and C (one cup provides 100 percent of the recommended dietary allowance), as well as magnesium, potassium, and iron.

Nutrition is one reason that sorrel has been a springtime favorite from the time humans were hunter-gatherers, but so is its taste. In 1720, the herbalist John Evelyn wrote that sorrel imparts "so grateful a quickness to the salad that it should never be left out." He went on to assert that its strong, agreeable flavor "renders not plants and herbs only, but men themselves, pleasant and agreeable." In 1865 Fearing Burr wrote of sorrel in *The Field and Garden Vegetables of America* that "we

have not one [other vegetable] so wholesome, so easy of cultivation.”

Indeed, by April, with no human labor, the sorrel patch is a luxurious carpet of green. The leaves stand tall on their long petioles, softly pointed at the top, widening slightly toward the bottom, and ending in a sharp point on either side of the stem. Most sources describe sorrel leaves as arrow-shaped, but they seem to me more oblong, an elongated rectangle whose top corners have been pulled up into a soft curve and whose bottom corners are pulled down to resemble the hindwings of a swallowtail butterfly.

Throughout April, May, and June, the sorrel patch grows so fast that no matter how much we cut, there is more than we can possibly use. Perennial vegetables are a godsend, particularly for the early spring markets, not to mention our own dinner tables. I put fresh leaves on a sandwich, sliver them into a salad, make a sorrel pesto, or put them in the food processor with yogurt and garlic for a simple sauce that livens up virtually anything. And sorrel soup is a simple and delicious spring classic.

Sorrel sequesters carbon, builds soil, provides habitat, and gives us greens.

By late spring or early summer, when we are finally reaping the first of the annual vegetables, the sorrel is already bolting and going to seed. Sturdy five-foot-tall spikes shoot up, each with many tiny pink and green flowers that attract bees and other pollinators. In addition to drawing bees to the field, the sorrel flowers entice important predatory insects, including the minute pirate bug and the big-eyed bug.

Although these sound like storybook names, they are real insects that eat spider mites, insect eggs, aphids, thrips, and small caterpillars. The big-eyed bugs are particularly attracted to potatoes and green beans and keep these vegetables safe from harmful pests.

Because the sorrel patch attracts bugs, it also attracts birds. Whenever I am harvesting sorrel, I am in surround-sound birdsong. One day as I was bunching sorrel for the farmers’ market, I noticed a particularly insistent bird who seemed to be shouting more than singing. I moved to the next sorrel plant and grabbed a large handful of stems with my left hand. As I moved in to cut them with the knife in my right hand, I stopped mid-swipe. There, just above my knife, hidden in the middle of the sorrel plant, was a nest carefully constructed out of the straw mulch. In it were two newly hatched chicks and one unhatched egg. The chicks’ beaks snapped open

at my disturbance, but my knife was not the winged breakfast they were awaiting. And the mother's shrill clamor told me it was time to move on.

The sorrel patch hosts many life forms other than birds and insects—from slugs to rabbits, and snakes to toads. But even more important than all this macro-life is the life of the soil. Because sorrel is perennial, the ground is undisturbed. Tillage, though necessary for most annuals, brings with it a host of problems—from exposing the soil to wind and water erosion, to releasing carbon held by the soil, to killing earthworms and destroying the homes of much of the microscopic life in the soil.

We are only beginning to learn about the complex, mostly invisible web of life in the soil, with its billions of bacteria, and miles of fungal mycelia in every teaspoon. Tilling rips apart the delicate, threadlike mycelia and tosses the bacteria to the surface, where many die from desiccation. Perennial crops need no tilling, so the life of the soil is undisturbed, encouraging biological activity, which creates that spongy, crumbly texture and rich earthy smell that characterizes a healthy soil with its thriving, intact web of life.

A well-mulched patch of perennials improves the structure, organic matter, and water-holding capacity of the soil. Year by year, the topsoil increases in quantity and quality, adding more organic matter through decomposition of the previous year's growth and the decay of the mulch. Organic matter is rich in carbon, and so as the perennial patch creates new topsoil, it also sequesters atmospheric carbon.

Even after sending up those flower spikes in early summer, the sorrel patch continues to give. The tiny flowers quickly mature into thousands of flat, papery, dangling, rust-brown seeds. We cut out the tough stalks as we harvest, and each plant continues to put forth new young leaves. In fact, harvesting seems to stimulate more growth, so the more you take, the more it gives.

And so for nine months, from the last freeze in March through the first freeze in November, sorrel provides. And it will be productive for 30 years or more, needing only composted manure and straw mulch, and perhaps dividing the plants now and then if they become too dense. In return, sorrel stores carbon, gives us fresh greens, provides habitat and food for insects and birds, snakes and slugs, and enhances the life of the soil, seen and unseen.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Spring begins with sorrel."