

A Weed by Any Other Name

Or, stalking the not-so-wild purslane

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A FEW YEARS AGO, my friend Peter came back from Cyprus with seeds in his pocket and tales of a tart, succulent mystery green the locals called *anthrakla*. It took us two years of research to find that same plant growing literally beneath our feet in New York City.

We had poked around in our neighborhood Greek-run produce stands as well as in market stalls in Beirut and Aleppo, but either the vegetable wasn't stocked or no one knew the English name. Peter's seeds sprouted, but in their little terra cotta pot, the shoots didn't look like what he'd eaten in Cyprus. A breakthrough came with the publication of *The Glorious Foods of Greece*, in which author Diane Kochilas identified *anthrakla* (more commonly, *glistrida*) as purslane. Just as important, Kochilas also gave the Spanish name, *verdolaga*, and the tip that it was most often available in the U.S. in Mexican groceries.



Once I knew what to call it, purslane seemed to be everywhere I turned: I found green, succulent bunches of it at the Mexican-run store that I had thought was just a newsstand. I noticed it gracing the cover of urban forager Steve Brill's *Wild Vegetarian Cookbook*. Reading an old Lebanese cookbook, I saw it called for in a recipe for *fattoush*, a traditional bread salad I knew well -- but apparently not that well. I even found a *New York Times* story from 1998 touting it as the next big food trend: Chefs like Rocco DiSpirito and Diane Forley praised its lemony sweetness and its springy texture. But celebrity-chef advocacy clearly hadn't made a lasting impression, because at the farmers' market, where big bunches of the fat-leaf domesticated variety lay piled high, puzzled customers furrowed their brows. One day at Whole Foods, I noticed purslane inappropriately packaged in the same tiny boxes as the fresh sage and thyme. When one shopper turned to his friend and asked, "What the heck is purslane, anyway?" I couldn't help delivering a mini-lecture on all I'd learned so far: Purslane, or *Portulaca oleracea*, is a succulent (a water-storing plant), and its smooth, crisp stems and tender leaves, often tinged with red, make it an excellent salad green. Added to soups and stews in the last 10 minutes of cooking, it wilts slightly, retaining a bit of crunch while developing a not-unpleasant slickness. Its bright flavor is a perfect foil for heavier bean and meat dishes. It's popular in the Middle East and India, where it's grown as a food crop. Oh, and it's exceptionally high in beta-carotene and omega-3 fatty acids.

What I hadn't mentioned in my spontaneous educational interlude was that purslane is a weed. Or at least it's generally considered to be in the US, where gardeners rail against its fast-growing tendrils. But I didn't realize how pervasive it was until I spoke to an old Greek woman I'd spotted on the street near my house in Astoria carrying two bags bulging with the succulent leaves. Although I already had my steady Mexican supplier, I had to stop her and ask, "Where did you get that?"

"Oh, people's yards," she whispered with a conspiratorial laugh. "But wash it well. You know, the dogs and cats . . ."

Walking home that afternoon, I felt like I'd gotten a new pair of glasses: I could see every leaf, and each had the characteristic paddle shape of purslane. It was thick in overgrown yards, poking out of window boxes, and even, I noticed as I reached my block, pushing up between the cracks in the sidewalk right in front of my house.

I washed it very well, and invited Peter over for a salad.

Recipe: Fattoush

This traditional Lebanese salad includes pita "croutons" for crunch. The tart purslane is enhanced by the powdered sumac, a tangy, purple-red spice, and a lemon vinaigrette. The proportions of purslane and lettuce can shift according to what you have on hand.

4 to 6 servings

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For the vinaigrette:

1 large clove garlic, minced fine or squeezed through a press
2 Tbsp. freshly squeezed lemon juice
6 Tbsp. fruity olive oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

For the salad:

2 rounds pita bread, preferably stale
1 small head romaine lettuce, trimmed and torn
1/2 lb. purslane, trimmed and snapped into 1-inch pieces
1 large tomato, coarsely chopped
1 small cucumber, coarsely chopped
4 scallions, sliced thin (white parts only)
1/4 cup coarsely chopped mint
1/4 cup coarsely chopped flat-leaf parsley

To garnish:

1/2 cup black olives, preferably Lebanese 1 Tbsp sumac

1. Combine the vinaigrette ingredients in a small jar with a tight-fitting lid. Shake to combine, then check seasoning.
2. Toast pita bread in a 350°F oven until dry and crisp, about 15 minutes. Break into bite-size pieces and set aside.
3. Combine remaining salad ingredients in a large bowl. Add pita pieces, then toss with a portion of the vinaigrette (you may not need all of the dressing).
4. Garnish with olives and sumac.

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Photos, by the author

