

Miner's lettuce

Question: Eating out recently, my entree included a tasty and pretty garnish. I was told it was wild miner's lettuce. What can you tell me about it and can I grow it at home?



Julie Burchstead
Master Gardener

Answer: Miner's lettuce, or *Claytonia perfoliata*, is a native plant particularly abundant in Oregon, California and Washington. Generally a diminutive 8 inches in height, it prefers to tuck into cooler moist places. Its clusters of dainty white flowers are collared by roundish fleshy leaves. The plant stalks tend to be tall and spindly.

I first learned of miner's lettuce as a culinary treat years ago when a friend was gathering it in the spring to sell to a local fine restaurant along with her more traditional greens. With a mild, slightly buttery flavor, it is used raw (flowers, leaves and stems) as a garnish, in salads, or to add a bit of crunch in a sandwich.

I hadn't thought much about it until last fall, when I was picking up some seed for this year's garden and packets of miner's lettuce were among the "gourmet greens" offerings. I bought a packet and began to do some research.

Miner's lettuce has been historically important in the Pacific Northwest and California. Rich in vitamin C, it was eaten by settlers and gold rush prospectors as a preventive for scurvy. Some Oregon native populations harvested it for food as a fresh raw green, while others used it as a poultice for minor scrapes.

A hardy self-seeding annual, most sources in my research indicated miner's lettuce is slow spreading and not invasive. It does not appear on Oregon, Washington or California's noxious weed lists. But there was some disagreement. One gardener blogged about it behaving a bit thug-like in his garden. Perhaps conditions there were especially generous, though it is apparently a prolific generator of its tiny black seed. Something to keep in

mind. Miner's lettuce is a cool weather plant, so this February, I sowed some seeds in pots in my unheated greenhouse. They sprouted abundantly without any special treatment. I am beginning to transplant the young plants now into a shaded bed in my yard.

If you don't have a greenhouse, this seed will germinate in soil temperatures as low as 40 degrees. It can also be sown in the fall for a winter crop, even in full shade. Some sources indicate, unlike spinach, miner's lettuce doesn't get bitter after it blooms. It is said to quickly replenish leaves with gentle harvesting, but if you find you prefer the youngest leaves, sowing several crops spaced a few weeks apart will provide a source across the season.

I look forward to both tasting this new treat in the kitchen and seeing how its unique and delicate form will add to my native plant bed in my garden.

These are the sweet heady days that make our gardener's hearts sing. New growth surrounds us with scent and color. Garden centers and our greenhouses are beginning to overflow with plants. We are rapidly approaching mid-May – so we can soon leave worries of frost behind us and plant with abandon. What new things are you looking forward to this season?

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.



Miner's lettuce is a tasty native plant found in the Pacific Northwest.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PIXABAY



Miner's lettuce has small white flowers.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PIXABAY



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PHOTO COURTESY OF JULIE BURCHSTEAD