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Sorrel is up!

Claire McCaughey

The snow is piled high in the garden, the air is very cold, and my gardening activities consist of seed starting indoors, watering houseplants, perusing horticulture websites, and poring over plant catalogues, books, and magazines. I am eager for the first signs of plant life in my edible garden to appear once the snow is gone. A patch of vivid green leaves coming up in early spring in one of my raised beds is something to celebrate. Sorrel is up!



Sorrel, early spring.
Claire McCaughey

Sorrel in the wild

Sorrel is the common name of several perennial edible plants, none of which are ornamental except for

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Coming soon!
Details on page 10.

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bloody sorrel that has interesting, red-veined leaves. All these plants are in the Polygonaceae (or Buckwheat) family: *Rumex acetosa* (common sorrel), *Rumex acetosella* (sheep sorrel), *Oxyria digyna* (mountain sorrel), and *Rumex sanguineus* var. *sanguineus* (bloody sorrel). Stephen Barstow's book ***Around the World in 80 Plants*** (Permanent Publications, 2014) – a great resource about wild perennial vegetables around the world – provides information about the various sorrels as wild edible plants. Of note, *Rumex acetosella*, though edible, is a weed.

Sorrel as a culinary herb

For most people, if they have heard of sorrel at all, it is likely as an ingredient in French cooking. A cultivar of common sorrel called 'Blonde de Lyon' is the sorrel many people grow as French sorrel (me included). There is also a plant specifically called true French sorrel (*Rumex scutatus*) which has smaller leaves than common sorrel. Sorrel leaves are used in cooking for their tangy, lemony flavour which comes from the high concentration of oxalic acid in the plant. It is best to eat the younger leaves which have a lower concentration of oxalic acid. It is an herb to add flavour rather than a vegetable. A few fresh sorrel leaves in a salad provide a tart lemony taste and the leaves are also used in sorrel mayonnaise. Cooked, sorrel leaves are used in sauces for fish and the classic French soup potage à l'oseille.

Grow your own

You will not find sorrel in your local supermarket or even in specialty grocery stores. It must be prepared fresh, so growing your own is the only way to have this herb for cooking. It is a hardy perennial plant in Ottawa and can usually be found as a plant at specialty herb or edible plant nurseries. It is rarely bothered by pests or diseases. Once it goes to seed when the temperature warms up the leaves become almost too bitter, so it is best early in the season which is also when its fresh flavour is most appreciated. The plant should be divided every year or two – a great way to share with gardener-cook friends. 🌱

Ask a Master Gardener

Compiled by Amanda Carrigan and Ann McQuillan

Master Gardeners answer helpline questions

When is the best time to prune trees?

Late winter to early spring, before buds start swelling, is a good time to prune many trees - there is less chance of infection then, and wounds will heal more rapidly. The exceptions are those, like maples, that are 'bleeders', which would have a lot of sap oozing out if pruned too early. Other 'bleeders' include birches, honey locust, black locust, willow, walnut, dogwood, poplar, sumac, and hornbeam. Prune these in early summer, after the leaves have matured (harder texture and darker colour than spring). Most other trees can also be pruned in mid-summer without problems. Avoid pruning too late in the fall, as wounds won't have a chance to heal before winter. However, dead wood can be removed at any time.

Last fall I brought in some of my geraniums and put them in the basement for the winter. What do I do to get them ready for spring?

It will depend on whether they are potted or bare-root. If they are bare-root, shake any dirt off them, trim the roots, and remove any dead leaves and shoots. Cut back stems to 20 cm (8"), and pot up the plant in soil-less grow mix or similar. Water well, and place in a sunny window, turning them a quarter turn per week so the new growth is uniform. If the plants are already in pots, you can change some of the soil (check for root damage in the process), then re-pot and follow the directions above. When daytime temperatures get above 10°C, start hardening your *Pelargoniums* off by giving them increasing amounts of outdoor time and sun each day. When the danger of frost is past, they can stay outdoors.

Older *Pelargoniums* can get woody, and new shoots tend to be leggy. You can pinch off some of these new shoots and root the cuttings to produce new plants with a more compact form than their parents.

Weeds: A Universal Problem

Josie Pazdzior

Weeds are easy to define but harder to manage. A weed is simply any plant growing in a cultivated setting that the gardener didn't plant and doesn't want there. This definition says nothing about the common inherent properties of weeds, because they share only those qualities that allow them to thrive in all sorts of places. Weeds can be unsightly, poisonous, harmful to desirable plants, and invasive. They can also be beautiful, edible, medicinal, nitrogen-fixers/soil improvers, and pollinator magnets which help sustain beneficial pollinating insects.

Weeds in agriculture can be a serious problem, reducing crop production by as much as 50%. In our gardens, weeds not only look messy but also compete with choice plants for water, light, and nutrition. Farmers often use ecologically sound practices to manage weed problems without resorting to herbicides: crop rotation, cover crops, organic mulches and other methods. We too can learn to manage weeds through cultural and physical methods and avoid a scenario in which invasive weeds take over the garden!

Know Your Weeds

The first step is knowing your weeds; if not the names, then being able to identify them as weeds. This can be tricky when they show up in spring amidst emerging perennials. Later they may become so entangled with the choice perennials that you can't tell what's what. Knowing the name allows you to find out crucial information. To identify them, you can send good photos and descriptions to the MG email help line, bring in samples to MG clinics at farmer's markets, or use a plant ID app.

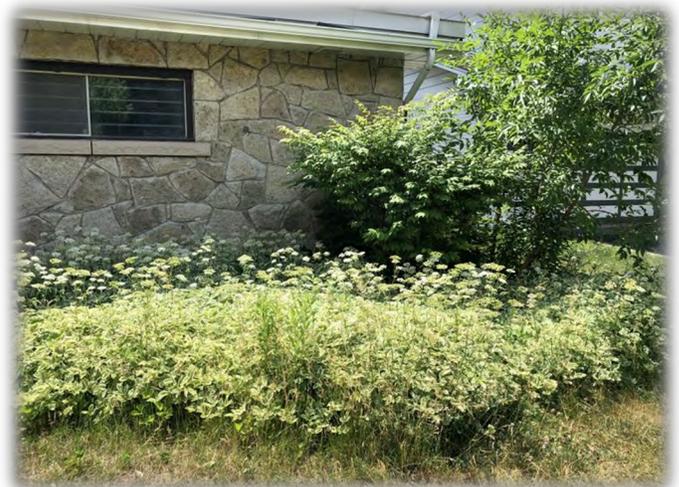
The most harmful weeds compete with garden plants for space, water and nutrients; and the invasive ones can even smother desirable plants. Weeds in the lawn are a special case, best managed by keeping the grass thick, healthy, and tall enough to shade out seeds.

Consider how particular weeds enter and spread in your garden. Some seeds float in on the breeze or hitch a ride with wildlife, while thousands more may have been in the soil for years, just waiting to become exposed to light at the surface. Seeds can also arrive in imported soil and mulch. Many perennial weeds are propagated by rhizomes and creeping stems. Even tiny bits of root left behind can re-establish the plant, which is why it's so hard to eradicate invasives like creeping bellflower, *Campanula rapunculoides*.



Where did these weeds come from? Air or soil or both?

Josie Pazdzior



Goutweed has taken over a perennial bed.

Josie Pazdzior

Weed-ending strategies

The different types of weed species call for different strategies. Annuals reproduce only by seed; perennials live for years, and can spread by underground or surface stems, rhizomes, and roots as well as by seed. Biennials, such as Queen-Anne's-lace, grow only roots, stems and leaves in a low rosette their first year, and the next season send up a flower stalk which produces seeds.

Some of the gardener's weapons in the ongoing fight against weeds include pulling them out by hand, cutting/mowing close to the surface or 2-4 cm under, shading the seedlings, covering with mulch, and solarizing as a final resort. General advice is to start early, weed regularly, and remove the flowers before they go to seed. The best way to discourage weeds is not to allow space and light where seeds can grow – except for a few patches of bare ground for solitary bees to make their homes.



No room for weeds in this beautifully full garden

Josie Pazdzior

A 5-8 cm layer of organic mulch needs regular topping up to work well. It does not completely eliminate weeds, which may seed right into it. However, they tend to be shallow-rooted and easier to pull. Don't be tempted to lay landscape fabric under the mulch in your perennial beds to prevent weeds; it is not very effective and causes other problems when it inevitably becomes exposed to view.

Timing is crucial

Annuals can be controlled by preventing their seeds from forming at all, which means pulling or cutting them back either before or right after blooming. Biennials and perennials can also be pulled or constantly cut or mowed close to the ground, to weaken them and prevent flowering. Dog-strangling vine (*Vincetoxicum nigrum*) can be dealt with this way, as it's very hard to get all of this particular root. As a rule, weeds with long taproots must be removed entirely.

In vegetable beds especially, an hour spent weeding as the veggie seedlings are getting established is worth several hours spent weeks later. By then the weeds will be flourishing while the transplants are likely to be small and weak. Focus on the area around the seedlings rather than the paths, which can be kept cut to avoid seed production there.



Well-weeded around cabbages, a few left in paths.

Josie Pazdzior

When hand weeding, I like to pull the weed with one hand, holding down the soil around the crown with the other hand, shake the soil from the roots, and firm it over the disturbed spot to re-cover any weed seeds and preserve moisture and soil. In vegetable and ornamental beds, a scuffle hoe is effective at an early stage to slice through weed seedlings just below the surface. This is best done in dry sunny weather to prevent them re-sprouting.

Consider no-till gardening

Digging the earth in spring to uproot weeds and loosen the soil is a common practice, but think about adopting the no-till method instead. This

means to dig or till the soil as little as possible. No-till gardening helps preserve the soil structure, maintain micro-organisms, retain moisture, and keep weed seeds safely buried.

Don't apply Roundup, vinegar, ammonia, or other similar solution to kill weeds, as these chemicals enter the soil, and can affect other plants. A weed burner (flamethrower) works well between cracks and walkways, though I've not used it myself.

Weeds will always be with us, but you can control their spread in your garden and beyond, which your neighbours will appreciate! 🌱

Will That be Sage or Savory?

Nancy McDonald

I moved from Prince Edward Island to Ottawa in 1990. Imagine my surprise when I searched for summer savory at Thanksgiving and there was none to be found. What would season my turkey stuffing? Ottawa friends told me they used sage. Indeed, it was only when I listened to Morningside with Peter Gzowski that I learned of the great Canada stuffing seasoning divide. From the Ontario-Quebec border east, most people used summer savory and from the Ontario-Quebec border west most people preferred sage. So, then I understood: I must grow my own summer savory and supplement my supply by purchasing some on travels east. An understanding relative even mailed some to me!

Now I grow both herbs in my garden and recommend both as outstanding culinary herbs. *Salvia officinalis* or garden sage is the main variety grown for culinary purposes. This member of the mint family is perennial in Ottawa 4B-5A zone. It can be grown from seed but as most of us want just one plant, a cutting, division or purchased plant is the way to go. Cuttings can be taken in late spring or early summer when the plant is actively growing. Dividing an established plant can be done in spring or fall.

Sage is native to the Mediterranean region and thrives in full sun with well-drained soil. Stems will be green the first year and become woody with age. Trim the plant to 15 cm in spring to encourage new stems. I wait until I see new leaves emerge and keep this new lower foliage in place to encourage healthy growth. At maturity, a sage plant can reach 60 cm in height and width. It is a tough plant once established, withstanding drought, wind and excess summer temperatures.



Golden sage.

Nancy McDonald

The grey green leaves and blue flowers of sage are delightful additions to your kitchen. It is a strongly flavoured herb popular for poultry stuffing, and used in sausage meats, omelettes, cheese and bean dishes. It can be used in pesto but I suggest combining with parsley at a ratio of 1-part sage leaves to 3-parts parsley. The leaves can be dried or frozen.

Summer savory (*Satureja hortensis*) is from the eastern Mediterranean region. The Romans, who considered it a good substitute for salt, introduced it to England. It is an ancient herb that the poet Virgil suggested should be planted near beehives. It is commonly described to have a delicate flavour, a cross between mint and thyme. An annual that is very easy to grow from seeds, summer savory needs full sun and can be grown in-ground or containers. It's my 'go to' herb for poultry stuffing, in traditional Tourtière and in potato scallop. It is often used in bean dishes to help prevent flatulence. It complements many milder flavoured foods as it is not overpowering. So, when a taste test tells me a main dish is missing just a "something, something", summer savory is often my choice.



Classic Tourtière with summer savory seasoning.
Nancy McDonald

For best flavour, I harvest summer savory before it flowers. The stems are cut and hung to dry in a dark location for two weeks. Following the advice

of a market gardener in PEI, I then put dried stems in a clean pillow case and shake the dickens out of it, to get more leaves and less woody stems. I then bottle it for winter use.



Summer savory drying
Nancy McDonald

I also grow winter savory (*Satureja montana*), a perennial in my garden. Once planted, it needs very little attention. It is earthier in flavour or more pungent than summer savory with notes of sage and thyme. It definitely can be used in stuffing, bean, vegetarian and meat dishes. There are interesting cultivars of winter savory. A winter carpet savory *Satureja montana* var. *illyrica* is suitable for dry, rocky sites and becomes a fragrant groundcover with purple flowers. Another, winter lemon savory *Satureja montana* var. *citriodora* is described as having a clean lemon scent. Both are culinary herbs.

So, will that be sage or savory? I recommend including them both as very useful culinary herbs in your garden. 🌿

Native plant:

Bloodroot - *Sanguinaria canadensis*

Gillian Boyd



Bloodroot buds and flowers .

Gillian Boyd

Bloodroot or *Sanguinaria canadensis* is one of the beautiful spring ephemeral or short-lived flowers that flourishes in my garden.

Its natural habitat is the rich deciduous woodland soil of eastern Canada but it also reaches west to the Great Lakes and south to Florida. Initially, I thought it would grow in the dry shade at the back of my garden. I didn't realise that the dense maple leaf canopy overhead in the summer would prevent any rain from reaching the ground to sustain it through dormancy, so failure was inevitable.

When I moved the bloodroot to semi-shade in my main garden, it settled in very happily. The flower stems emerge in April with the buds tightly wrapped in large lobed basal leaves.

Growing about 15-18 cm tall, each shoot produces a single short-lived white flower with yellow stamens and plenty of pollen but no nectar. The flowers only open on sunny days when the temperature reaches about 7-8°C and when early bees and flies become active. Even without nectar, cross-pollination occurs because pollen is an essential source of protein that bees need to feed their young. If it is too cool for flying insects, bloodroot can self-pollinate. Once fertilized, the petals fall but, as the stems grow, the leaves unfurl and continue to grow much larger, forming a useful ground cover after the flowers die.

The plant is poisonous and named for the red sap that is produced by the foliage and roots. Indigenous Peoples used it for dyeing fabric, for skin decoration and medicinally for skin diseases, warts and tumours. They also used it internally as a sedative, contrastingly as a stimulant or as a tonic. Its main component is a chemical compound of alkaloids called sanguinarine, a powerful toxin that can cause serious harm if not carefully controlled. At present, it is not recommended for internal use because there



Bloodroot pollen.

Gillian Boyd



Spreading bloodroot.

Gillian Boyd



Bloodroot seedpods, elaiosomes and ants.

Gillian Boyd



Double bloodroot

Kelly Noel

is no clinical research evidence that it is effective.

I had read that bloodroot went dormant in mid-summer like many other ephemerals, so I was surprised when I saw the rhizomes moving into sunnier areas with no signs of dormancy. Despite their preference for acidic woodland soil, they also appear to find my dry, sandy, more alkaline soil quite acceptable. I now have to control their spread or they would choke out plants with shallower roots.

I also noticed new leaves appearing far from the rhizomes. Most ephemerals produce seeds with tiny oil-rich attachments attractive to ants called elaiosomes (e/lie/o/somes). Foraging ants disperse the seeds by taking them back to their nests to feed to their larvae. Only the outer layer is used and the rest discarded, though still viable. Ant waste disposal chambers are very fertile and ideal for germination, hence the appearance of new plants in different parts of the garden. Myrmecochory (mer/mi/cock/ory) is the charming lyrical name for this mutual and ingenious relationship between ants and bloodroot and other ephemeral plants. It comes from myrmex, Greek for ant. I never knew before that, despite their damaging anthills, ants could also be welcome beneficial insects.

Besides our native bloodroot, there is a double form (*Sanguinaria canadensis* Multiplex), a sterile mutant discovered in Ohio in 1916 by an amateur botanist. He increased its spread and in 1919 had enough to share with several friends and arboretums. It is a shorter, slower-growing plant that can only be divided by vegetative cuttings and goes dormant in July. It does not grow well for me and I think only survives because it gets some of my prized leaf mould every year and a generous dollop of compost in November. It blooms about two weeks later than the single form and the flowers last longer. A great many gardeners claim it as their absolute favourite plant.

If you are lucky enough to have growing space nearby, plant bloodroot close to your door to continually gladden your heart at this longed-for sign of spring.





Gardeners Beware: Amur maple—*Acer ginnala*

Gail Labrosse



Amur maple.
Edythe Falconer

An invasive species from Asia, Amur maple grows as a small tree or large shrub from four to seven metres high. This maple has smooth dark bark, pretty red samaras (two-winged seeds) and bright green arrow-shaped leaves that turn dazzling red in the autumn. It is well suited to urban areas: an appropriate size for small city lots, not high enough to interfere with hydro lines, tolerant of urban pollution and winter hardy. With so many positive characteristics, the Amur maple has become a popular urban landscape tree. So why is it designated an invasive species?

A single Amur maple can produce up to 5000 two-winged seeds a year that are dispersed on the wind and aggressively colonize new surroundings. This maple thrives in a wide range of habitats, adapts to existing moisture conditions, soil types and a wide pH range. It reproduces and spreads quickly, out-competing many native species. These invasive traits can displace shrubs and understory trees in open woodlands. In fields, the Amur maple can shade out native plant species. The end result is the disruption of native ecosystems on which animals and plants depend. Even though recognized by the Ontario Invasive Plant Council as a non-

native invasive species, the Amur maple is still being sold.

If you are looking for a native alternative to Amur maple try a Serviceberry (*Amelanchier* spp.) a medium-size deciduous tree or shrub with four-season interest. It has delicate white spring flowers, small red-purple summer berries that birds love, bright red, orange or yellow autumn colour and lovely smooth grey bark in winter. 🌱



Indian pear (*Amelanchier* spp).

I knew the *Amelanchier* as “Indian pear”. There were many of these shrubby trees growing along the shoreline in Nova Scotia where I grew up. I loved the berries and ate them by the handful. Years later, when I started to garden in Ottawa, I was at my local nursery and passed a potted shrub with berries on it, labelled *Amelanchier canadensis*. I thought it might be an Indian pear. I filched a berry and ate it tentatively – hoping it wasn’t poisonous! I was very excited at the familiar taste! So I bought it – it is the tree in this picture. But I have been lucky to get even two or three berries from it each year. Cedar waxwings always appear from nowhere and strip it clean just before the berries are ripe.

Kelly Noel

Fact:

Amelanchier is a genus of about 20 species of deciduous shrubs and small trees in the rose family, including ten that are native to Canada. Every province has at least one species. According to **Trees in Canada**, it is also known as serviceberry, Juneberry, Saskatoon, shadbush or Indian pear.



Saskatoon (*Amelanchier alnifolia*)

Amelanchier alnifolia is found from western Ontario to British Columbia and the Yukon. This photo shows a berry branch before the fruit develops. It was taken on a trip home to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan where they are rightly called Saskatoons, not serviceberries. Many home gardeners grow them there. Saskatoons make delicious pies and jams.

Julianne Labreche

Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton present:



You are invited to

Learn over Lunch

with Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton.

When:

Tuesdays at 12:30 pm (Eastern)
from April 6 to November 2, 2021.

Each Zoom session will include a presentation on the topic of the week followed by Q&A – 25-30 minutes total.

Click [here](#) to register for these meetings – attend as many as you can.

Registrants will receive a confirmation email with the Zoom link and a weekly email reminder with upcoming topics. If you have questions on these topics, send them to mgoc.ttl@gmail.com. And remember, we are always happy to answer any gardening questions on our email helpline: mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca.

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Helplines - are monitored daily
Send questions and photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for Identification.

"Trowel Talk can be found on the Lanark County Master Gardener's and Ottawa Carleton Master Gardener's Websites".



Clinics

Closed



Talks and Events

For information on gardening in and around the Ottawa valley:

<https://gardeningcalendar.ca/>

Talks given by Master Gardeners for garden clubs and horticultural societies using Zoom or other virtual meeting software. If you wish to attend please contact the host organization. .

Article suggestions box

This is your chance, as a reader, to suggest an idea for an article you would like to see in Trowel Talk. Click on the button.



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Letters to editor: mgottawaeditor@gmail.com

Banner Photograph: Wheel barrows, S.R. Bicket

Sunday, March 21, 2:00 – 3:30 pm
Candace Dressler, Fran Dennett with Mary Reid
Gardening with Native Plants
[Capital Grannies Fundraiser](#)

Tuesday, April 13, 7 pm
Claire Leduc and Catherine Disley
Why we love Annuals – the interest and pleasure of annuals.
[Old Ottawa South Garden Club](#)