

Spring Treats from the Kitchen Garden

On days when we grow weary of winter, Phil and I take a stroll through the garden beds to seek out even the slightest hint of green. There are precocious stalwarts among our plantings that start to emerge from winter's frosty grip even while daytime temperatures hover in the 20s. These herbs may not be marquee names in the garden or the kitchen, but they gladden the heart and lend a freshness to palates eager for spring's awakening.

Anise hyssop

This ornamental, perennial mint relative is equally at home in either the cut flower bed or the kitchen garden. Gray-green felted leaves with a purple blush and a sweet licorice fragrance make a delicious herbal tea. Spikes of periwinkle bottlebrush flowers are irresistible to bees, butterflies and hummingbirds, while songbirds relish the oily black seeds. It self-sows readily but not annoyingly, making it a great passalong plant for friends.

Lovage

This stately, long-lived perennial herb is often compared to celery, but with a richer, more complex flavor. Early growth emerges from frozen ground like clasped hands of golden green with a blush of copper. These young leaves are a classic partner to rainbow trout. Older leaves lend a richness to soups and stews, and can be chopped into chicken or tuna salad. In midsummer its flower stalks tower at a height of 5 – 6 feet and become abuzz with beneficial insects. And its hollow stems make a delicious edible straw for Bloody Marys.

French Sorrel

French sorrel is a leafy green whose tart, lemony flavor adds a bright note to salads, soups and sauces. When young and tender, its sword-shaped leaves can be tossed into salads or minced into herb butters. Larger leaves can be melted down in a bit of butter or stock for soups, or blended into a creamy sauce for fish and vegetables. Or try this the next time you're grilling fish fillets: cut the fish fillets into strips, top each strip with a pat of herb butter, and wrap them in whole sorrel leaves that have been soaked in water (to prevent burning). Secure each wrapped bundle with a toothpick and grill for 5 minutes a side. The fish will be moist and delicately flavored.

Coriander-Crusted Tuna with Sorrel Green Peppercorn Sauce

(Serves 4)

This dish is an explosion of flavors, with the warm spiciness of the coriander contrasting with the tangy, lemony sorrel sauce. Tuna stands up well to these flavors, with its firm flesh and bold taste. Both the sauce and coriander dry rub can be made ahead of time and refrigerated until needed. Grilling the tuna takes just minutes.

(4) 6 to 8 oz. tuna steaks, 1" thick

Zest of 2 lemons

2 tbsp. coriander seed

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

3 tbsp. olive oil

Sorrel Green Peppercorn Sauce (see below)

In a dry skillet over medium heat, toast coriander seeds until fragrant, about 5 minutes. Transfer to a coffee grinder or spice mill and grind to a coarse powder. Place coriander powder in a bowl and stir in lemon zest, salt and pepper. Brush olive oil on tuna and sprinkle coriander rub on both sides of the steaks, pressing to adhere. Prepare the grill. Grill tuna steaks for about 4 minutes per side or until just pink in the center. Transfer the tuna to plates and serve with sorrel green peppercorn sauce.

Sorrel Green Peppercorn Sauce

(Makes 1 ½ cups)

2 cups French sorrel leaves, packed (discard stems)

½ cup chopped onion

½ cup walnuts

Juice of 1 lemon

¾ cup olive oil

1 tbsp. green peppercorns, drained

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Place sorrel, onion, walnuts and lemon juice into a blender or food processor and blend to a creamy sauce. Transfer to a bowl and stir in peppercorns. Season to taste. Refrigerate until needed. Serve at room temperature.