

Spring Tonic: Foraging Creasy Greens and Asparagus

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

Winter or upland cress, affectionately known by country folks as *creasy greens*, are the first, and many think the best, wild greens of the season. After a winter of starchy, high protein foods, our bodies are craving the vitamins and minerals abundant in greens, and especially in cress. Small plants over-winter in fields, pastures and lawns and grow to harvest size in February and March. Cress can also be planted in the garden in the fall and over-wintered to pick in early spring.



Look for little tufts of green in harvested soybean fields. On closer examination, cress is a low-growing rosette about 8” to 12” across and composed of many small, dark green leaves. If there is a central or flowering stalk, they have bolted and are past their prime – start picking earlier next year. Individual leaves have a large rounded end with smaller lobes going down the stem. You can cut the whole rosette next to the ground or pick just the tender leaves. You will want to remove the tough part of the stem on mature leaves, either in the field or at home, and then wash them several times to remove dirt and grit.

Cress can be eaten raw and adds a peppery dimension to salads, but is best prepared as a potherb like kale, spinach or collards. After stemming and washing, we bring a pot of water to a boil and blanch the greens briefly, either in the pot or by pouring the boiling water over them. Most recipes omit this step, but this is the way my mother did it. Par-boiling probably reduces the bitterness of mature leaves, but also may dissolve some of the water-soluble nutrients. After draining and discarding the first water, the greens are put back into the pot, covered with fresh water, brought back to a boil and simmered for an indeterminate time, or until ready to serve. Some fatty seasoning meat, such as fatback, hog jowl or bacon, or even lard or bacon drippings, is added to the pot for flavor.

Cress and other potherbs are served in bowls along with the *pot likker* (the appropriate Southern term for the liquid remaining after greens are cooked). In the South, cornbread is traditionally served along with greens and used to sop up the pot likker, or crumbled in the bowl and eaten along with the greens. Apple cider or pepper vinegar is usually offered as the only condiment. Pepper vinegar, also known as pepper sauce, is made in late summer or fall. Fill a jar loosely with whole cayenne or hot chili peppers (peppers look better whole, but you may want to cut a slit down the side to expose the seeds and membranes to the vinegar). Boil some white or apple cider vinegar and fill the jar almost to the top taking care to cover all parts of the peppers. Put the lid on and just store in the pantry until you have pork roast or greens.

It takes a lot of creasy greens to make a *mess*. “Mess” is a legitimate but imprecise old English term meaning enough to make a hearty meal for however many are eating. A large shopping bag full of cress will cook down to less than a half-gallon of greens, or enough to feed a family of three or four. The first mess of the season is usually larger than subsequent messes – it is not unusual for country folks to prepare enough to make the first meal of the season of nothing but greens and cornbread to satisfy their cravings, then subsequent servings are naturally more moderate.

Other wild potherbs to forage in Virginia come along later in the season and include lambsquarters, mustard greens and various amaranths, such as redroot pigweed. Of these, lambsquarters are my favorite and I think they are better than spinach. I also know that they have not been sprayed or treated with any chemicals. Though we have plenty of poke growing throughout the region, poke sallet is not as popular here as in the Appalachian mountains and deep South. Many think that “sallet” is an ignorant southern corruption of salad when in actuality *sallet* is the proper term, from old English, for a mess of potherbs. All parts of the pokeweed, including leaves, are toxic to mammals and therefore proper preparation is essential. Only young leaves, without tinges of red, are harvested, washed and boiled three times. After the first two boilings, the greens are rinsed and the water (and toxins) discarded. For the third boiling, they are seasoned and simmered as described above for other potherbs.

Asparagus grows wild along fencerows and roadways throughout Virginia and starts coming up during warm spells in early April. Make a note during the summer of where the patches of feathery fronds are growing, or look for the brown remnants of last year’s patches and watch for the young spears to start poking up. Asparagus grows from the roots and comes back in the same patches each year, so remember where you found them. Asparagus plants are easy to grow from roots if you have an area in your yard or garden that you can leave alone and let them grow all summer without being cut down. Summer growth provides the energy for the next crop. Cut young shoots when the stalks are four to twelve inches high, while the tips are still tight and before they start branching and going to seed.



Ever since I was a kid, it has been my job to find the wild asparagus patches around the farm and keep them picked for a month or so. I know where they all are and make the rounds every few days. Asparagus needs to be picked regularly, and cut at ground level, or it gets too tall, goes to seed and stops producing.

Young asparagus tips are delicious raw; I usually nibble on a few while I am picking. The best way to separate the tender tips from the tougher stems is to bend a stalk sharply and it will snap at the right place. Spears can be grilled, stir-fried, roasted or broiled, but the traditional method of preparation is simmering in water until barely tender. Put thicker stalks in the pot first, followed by the thinner ones. Do not overcook or they get mushy and fibrous. Some cooks dip them in ice water to stop the cooking and then re-heat to serve.

Even when picked on schedule or bought in bunches, there are a lot of stems to deal with. Rather than throw them out, make asparagus soup. Most people are familiar with cream style asparagus soup, but we prefer a simple clear broth. It is an eagerly awaited spring tonic. Just break or cut the stems so they will fit in a pot, barely cover with water and simmer along with some beef bouillon granules. Bouillon is added to taste and should not overpower the asparagus flavor. A steaming hot cup before supper whets the appetite and sets the stage for any good meal. Clear soups, broths and consommés are elegant in their simplicity. It is a shame that so many Americans have forgotten about them.