

## GARLIC MUSTARD (*Alliaria officinalis*)

Garlic mustard is a classic example of a good plant gone bad. I recently ran into a patch in disturbed soil in front of a friend's house in Urbana. Another friend, who lives near Mahomet, says his woods are horribly infested. Due to its habit of rampant self-seeding, Illinois has outlawed it.

Originally brought to this country as a condiment, garlic mustard is a beautiful plant with scalloped leaves and clusters of delicate white flowers. But I never recall the Herb Society doing it as an Herb of the Month or serving it in refreshments. We need to remedy this neglect. I think it would make an excellent spread or dip and might go well with orange, mustard, curry powder, tomato and maybe red wine. Given its ready availability in large quantities, let the experimenting begin!

Although I have lots of gardening books, only two mention garlic mustard. *The Fragrant Path*, by Louise Beebe Wilder, 1932, includes it in her chapter on "Plants of Evil Odour." She writes, "The little Sauce-alone or Jack-by-the-hedge, *Alliaria officinalis* (*Erysimum alliaria*), a gypsy of British hedgerows, has the Garlic odour in a very strong degree, and Ann Pratt tells us its name of Sauce-alone was given from its uses, 'for to some who cannot afford more costly condiments it is serviceable in adding flavor to the frugal diet.'"

*The Random House Book of Herbs*, by Roger Phillips and Nicky Foy, 1990, lists garlic mustard as *Alliaria petiolata* and includes it among culinary herbs. It says that garlic mustard is perennial and grows in damp hedgerows, wood edges, shady roadsides and gardens. It has a taproot that smells strongly of garlic. The basal leaves form a rosette and the stem can reach 8-40 inches. The flat-topped cluster of flowers blooms from April to June.

The plant got its name from the smell of the leaves when crushed. They can be used raw in salads, boiled as a vegetable or used to flavor sauces, stews and salted meat. The leaves can be dried and the seeds are edible.

Garlic mustard also has medicinal uses. It was thought to strengthen the digestive system and was taken internally to produce sweat. When applied externally, its antiseptic properties relieved itching from bites and stings.

The Web is more informative, although most information relates to garlic mustard's invasive qualities and how to get rid of it. The current Latin name appears to be *A. petiolata* and it's in the mustard family (*Brassicaceae*). That fact and the smell of garlic explain its more common name.

In this country, it's a cool season biennial that appears as a rosette the first year and re-mains green through the winter. It develops flowering stalks the next spring, which produce seed and die by June. Although some desirable native plants look similar, garlic mustard can be positively identified by the smell when the leaves are crushed. Some sites mention that the leaves of the first-year plants are bitter during the summer, but taste better from late fall to early spring. The bitterness is reduced by cooking or mixing with other foods. The arrowhead-shaped stem leaves produced the second year are said to be more pungent and less bitter in the spring, than the basal leaves were in the cold. The leaves should be cooked only briefly to prevent mushiness.

Garlic mustard plants with exceptionally large leaves may have large, whitish, fleshy taproots, which taste like horseradish. They're good from late fall to early spring, before the flower stalks appear. They

can be used like horseradish, grated into vinegar, or sliced thinly and eaten raw. The seeds can be used as a substitute for mustard seeds.

Since garlic mustard self-seeds so readily, it crowds out other spring-blooming plants that insects and other wildlife need for food. Research has shown that garlic mustard produces compounds that inhibit the growth of other plants. Garlic mustard prefers moist shaded locations, but will invade any disturbed area.

*Thanks to Dianna Visek for this report on garlic mustard.*