

Lovage and its companions

Sharp, peppery and even a little sweet, the flavours of celery come in several versatile guises, as *Jane Perrone* discovers

In the years following World War II, my grandfather had five allotment plots. He grew everything from asparagus to potatoes, and built his own greenhouses from scratch to feed his wife and five children. My mother remembers my grandmother being chagrined if a poor harvest forced her to stoop to a visit to the vegetable market.

I suspect he found growing celery (*Apium graveolens* var. *dulce*) a breeze – unlike most modern gardeners. Consult any vegetable handbook and there are dire warnings about celery's need for 'an endless supply of water to hand' (Anna Pavord, *The New Kitchen Garden*) and 'rich, well-drained soil' (Lucy Halsall, *Step-By-Step Veg Patch*). In summary, as DG Hessayon put it in *The Vegetable Expert*, 'newcomers to vegetable growing soon learn that growing traditional celery involves a lot of effort'. New-fangled, self-blanching celery offers a slightly easier row to hoe, but not by much. I admit it: I have never even tried to grow celery, warned off by its fearsome reputation.

Instead, I grow plants that belong to the same flavour family, if not the same plant genus. Lovage (*Levisticum officinale*), Alexanders (*Smyrniolum olusatrum*), angelica (*Angelica archangelica*) and par-cel (*Apium graveolens* var. *secalinum*). These are thrifty, hardy, handy plants, all parts of which are edible, from seed to root. Who needs celery, eh?

I first came across Alexanders growing rampant on a grass verge near a new housing estate in landlocked Bedfordshire – proof that those who state confidently this is a strictly coastal plant are wrong. Along with the better known, but more widely hated ground elder (*Aegopodium podagraria*), Alexanders arrived in this country with the Romans, who valued both as pot herbs.

The flavour of Alexanders may be more coarse than celery, but it is a great deal easier to grow: so much so that I do not leave it to romp around in my garden but collect it from beneath hedgerows instead, when it reaches a peak in April and May. The young leaves can be scattered through a salad but my favourite way to use Alexanders is to infuse it in gin. Never was I more popular at work than the week I brought in a bottle of this hedgerow tippie, perfect for making what forager John Wright calls 'gin and tonic with wings'.

GROWING LOVAGE

Expert advice from Julie Kendall, lead horticulturist at the Eden Project, Cornwall

Position Lovage will tolerate partial shade, but prefers full sun. I've never been able to kill lovage – it is one of the hardiest herbs there is. I love it as a plant in the border, it gives you good height: from standing still to full height in one season, it can get up to 2m tall.

Soil It will grow in pretty much any soil barring heavy clay. It does like rich, moisture-retentive soil but it will seed itself around. You'll achieve fresher growth in spring if you give it a layer of mulch and plenty of water.

Harvesting In summer you can cut it down and you'll get fresh growth. Cut the flower heads down and it will put its energies into the leaves. It grows really easily from fresh seed, like most umbels, in late summer, sown in trays in the greenhouse and planted out in spring, or you can divide an established plant or take root cuttings.



Above Par-cel is also known as Chinese celery, leaf celery and cutting celery.

So why aren't our herb patches packed with Alexanders? Over time, the plant lost ground in gardens to cultivated celery, and for the past century or two has remained only as a semi-wild survivor. Perhaps the reason for this was simply that it didn't taste as good, but there is another theory that it became associated with black magic in the Middle Ages and lost popularity in those God-fearing times. And the source of the curious name? In her book *The Origin of Plants*, Maggie Campbell-Culver suggests it 'derives from the leaf shield which, when pulled back, resembles the shape of the great hero's helmet'. Who can say if it is true, but I love the romance of it.

A NEW LEAF

The origins of the name lovage are almost as delightful. In medieval times it was known as love-ache – ‘ache’ being a term for parsley, a plant it resembles both in looks and, to a degree, flavour. In almost every language its name contains a link to love, and it was considered an aphrodisiac. For instance, the Germans call it Liebstöckel; literally ‘love stick’. More practically and prosaically, the Greeks used it as a cure for flatulence and in the Middle Ages it served as a naturally deodorising lining for travelers’ shoes. Meanwhile angelica – also known as holy ghost – has been a popular medicinal plant for centuries. The story goes that its powers were revealed to a 14th century monk and physician by an archangel, as echoed in its full Latin name, *Angelica archangelica*.

Unlike Alexanders, I do grow lovage and angelica in my garden. Both make fine architectural plants when fully grown towards the end of the summer, and are often more than 6ft tall. You have to choose



Left Alexanders has a generally coarser flavour than celery. **Below** Lovage leaves are similar in taste to parsley.

Lovage leaves are a brilliant partner to eggs and cheese, while angelica’s culinary highlight is as a natural sweetener and flavour enhancer

between height and flavour, however, as the best way to keep fresh flushes coming is to cut them back regularly. Lovage leaves are a brilliant partner to eggs and cheese, while angelica’s culinary highlight is as a natural sweetener and flavour enhancer when matched with fruit such as gooseberries, rhubarb and currants. Jekka McVicar suggests tying the leaves into a bunch when stewing fruit so you can remove them with ease at the end of the cooking time. Although more usually associated with angelica, young lovage stems can be candied, too.

Par-cel seems to have almost as many names as there are people growing it: smallage, Chinese celery, leaf celery and cutting celery, to name a few. It is usually billed as a leafy celery substitute, but in some ways the plant is the root of true celery. Smallage, a somewhat bitter wild form of celery, was bred and refined over centuries, so is the ancestor of today’s crisp, if somewhat bland stalk celery. It is too bitter to eat raw but Sarah Raven praises this herb as ‘exceptionally hardy’ and values it as an addition to risottos, stocks and homemade soups.



RECIPE: LOVAGE CURD CHEESE

Kathy Slack, of the blog and food business at www.glutsandgluttony.com, offers private dining and cookery classes across the Cotswolds. She says this recipe for a mild and fresh cheese is incredibly simple but is also somewhat unusual. “It is perfect for a light lunch or a dinner party. It is a very mild and fresh cheese, which seems to enjoy the punch that the lovage brings.” Similar to cottage cheese but with a smoother texture, curd cheese is a low-fat source of protein to add to fresh salad leaves in summer.

Serves 2

INGREDIENTS

1 litre unhomogenised whole milk
1 tsp rennet
2 tbsp finely chopped lovage
A squeeze of lemon juice and a little zest
Salt and pepper
Rapeseed oil

METHOD:

• Warm the milk to 38°C in a saucepan then, remove from the heat and stir in the rennet.

- Rest for 15 minutes, then scoop the curd off the watery whey with a slotted spoon and place it in a muslin cloth.
- Tie up the muslin and hang the cheese sack somewhere to drip for 3 hours. Suspended from the tap in the kitchen sink is a good place.
- Remove the curd, now a little firmer, from the muslin and gently combine it with the lovage, lemon juice, salt and pepper.
- Serve drizzled with rapeseed oil and a little lemon zest. ■