

Bittercresses by Kathleen Sayce

Several decades ago, a tiny rosette of a plant appeared in nursery pots, and then in local gardens, where it initially went by the name ‘Shot-in-the-eye’, for its ability to toss its seeds up and out, and yes, right into a gardener’s unwary eye. I’ve never been so glad that I wear glasses, than when this little annual plant arrived in my garden.

These were eventually identified as several species of bittercress. I will not burden you with the details of each species. Telling them apart requires flowers, to count the stamens, seed pods, to check the angle at which pods are held away from the stem, and a hand lens, to look for rows of tiny hairs on stems. Sparing you this.

These are winter annuals, where seeds germinate in fall and grow into winter, often flowering mid winter in mild years, definitely flowering by early spring.

When moisture is readily available, bittercresses can go through two or three generations in one year, discouraging news for a gardener! They have delicate white flowers, can grow from seedlings to leafy rosettes to flowering to ripe seeds in less than two months in summer, or take four to five months in winter. These tiny seed tossers have spread around the world in temperate zones, one exploding pod at a time.

The leaves are edible before the plants begin to flower, with a bitter flavor that lends them to sautés, though they also do well mixed with milder greens in fresh salads. The next time you are weeding bittercresses from your garden, weed well ahead of flowering and save the rosettes for eating.