

December 2016 Plant of the Month



Portulaca oleracea L., Common Purslane

Plant of the Month for December is a diminutive member of New Jersey's flora, common purslane. This remarkable little plant is an annual of the Portulacaceae, the purslane family with questionable nativity. It is found State-wide, yet is only listed by USDA Plants Database and Mary Hough (1983) for New Jersey's central counties. This discrepancy is due to the fact this common plant is seldom collected for herbaria specimens, and this void provides the false impression that the plant is restricted to Central New Jersey. Based on observations from reputable botanists, it's found in every New Jersey county, often in association with gardens, farm fields or roadsides. The plant is widely distributed beyond New Jersey. The USDA Plants Database maps this plant in throughout the United States as well as the entire south tier of Canadian provinces.

The plant has a long history as an edible plant. The records (written and archaeological) indicate this plant was used for thousands of years in the Eastern Mediterranean. It was known by all of the philosophers of the day, and was said to have medicinal values when eaten. The plant is most likely introduced to North America, with the introduction occurring in "Pre-Colombian" times. Paleo-botanical records begin in native American sediments not long before the advent of the Colombian Era. Many stories and conjecture exist about explorers reaching our shores before 1492. We know the Norse did, and the archaeological evidence for Irish and Iberian Celts, Druids and Irish monks exist, although suspect. We know the Norse made land fall in North America a thousand years before old Christopher. Common purslane and other similar plants with suspect nativity may be better archaeological evidence for early European explorers than the stones and bones. The archaeological record has identified plants such as common purslane, pigweed and other so called cosmopolitan weeds in pits associated with the middle and late Woodland cultures.

Common purslane, when eaten, is a salad green. Native Americans also used the plant, often for more than its food value. Eastern tribes used the plant as ear medicine and for skin ailments.