

Rock Samphire: Stranger

Gareth Evans shares the long history of this salty seashore plant and explains the differences between rock and marsh samphire.

Pity the plant that's lost its former fame; pity the plant that's even lost its name. For most people 'samphire' is a handful of green, crunchy shoots offered on fish-stall counters. However, this salty-tasting marsh samphire (*Salicornia europaea*, Amaranthaceae) can be seen as something of an interloper adopting the identity of a fellow seashore plant that has an intriguing history as an aromatic spice, nutritious vegetable and medicine.

Rock samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*, Apiaceae or Umbelliferae) is one of the more obscure British natives that feature in Classical myth. Theseus' dish of rock samphire is in keeping with the rest of the humble meal – sowthistle and rough bread – that he was offered before he fought the Minotaur. This detail appears in a Roman re-telling of the Greek myth and its inclusion in such a lowly list probably reflects its relative abundance.

Rock samphire

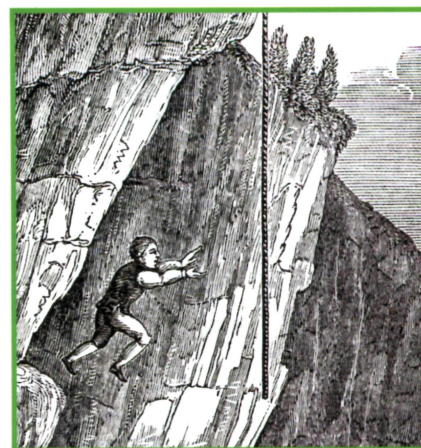
Deeply rooted in the cliffs, rocks or shingle above the high-tide line, this perennial's established distribution appears to fringe the shores of the Roman Empire at its height. Stretching from Hadrian's Wall down the Atlantic coast, around the Mediterranean rim to the Black Sea, it thrives particularly well in chalk, limestone, or even mortar. Rock samphire spreads readily by means of its corky textured, floating seeds. Global warming has extended its northern range to the southern Norwegian coast, apparently borne there by currents from the UK. Thriving in the thermal buffer that the seashore provides, the fleshy leaves and internal chemistry of this attractive wildflower protect it from the effects of the salty environment.

The heady citrus/resin aroma that rises from the plant on a hot day bears witness to its volatile oils. Its vitamin and mineral content also make this edible plant highly nutritious; its varied plant constituents include anti-bacterial and anti-inflammatory compounds. Known as a diuretic in Classical times, it was also recommended against jaundice and menstrual problems. These uses were variously transmitted and warmly endorsed by the English herbalists. An enthusiastic John Evelyn grew it for his Deptford kitchen knowing that its cultivation was not reliant on a saline habitat.

Rock samphire's long-lasting popularity as a foodstuff may eventually have taken away from its medicinal use. A 1782 pharmacopoeia commented typically: 'it is more used as a sauce in pickle, than in medicine' (the meaning is 'used as seasoning as a pickle'; references to a historical samphire sauce can be culinary red herrings). The same applies to UK folk records, which is in contrast to modern Italian ethnobotanical studies. In Liguria: "a decoction of aerial parts harvested before fructification used against inflammations of the urinary tract and prostate. Leaf decoction used as liver purifier ... corporal baths with this plant were also indicated to favour pregnancy".



Rock samphire produces its tender leafy shoots in spring. Umbels of yellow flowers (below) follow in late summer. Samphire harvesting (below right), as this engraving shows, could be a precarious occupation.



Photos: Gareth Evans

on the Shore

Its greatest historical reputation was against scurvy, which has been borne out by its high vitamin C content. It was useful as a long-keeping fresh ration for fishermen, alternatively it was preserved in vinegar to accompany long-distance fishermen and ocean-going captains (see Herb Society online newsletter no.1). Samuel Pepys's gift of a barrel of samphire on the 21 September 1660 was from the clerk of the Victualler of the Navy.

Its distinctive taste, health-maintaining properties and availability led shore-dwelling communities to make an important trade of their surplus natural harvest. It was considered as part of the seashore bounty, as this 16th century description from Ireland notes: "Oysters muskels cockles and Samphier about the sea coastes are to be had for the gathering, great plenty; the Phisitions there holde that Samphier is a present remedie against the stone". Being 'acid in the kidneys', a course of samphire was taken against kidney stones; this, in conjunction to its home in rocky cracks, had established its sympathetic magic association.

The South Coast supplied the London samphire market, a large trade that might require only a crowbar, rope and a great deal of care in scrabbling over the cliff face to collect the tender spring growth. Dover's industry has been captured in Shakespeare's cliff-top picture-painting in *King Lear* (1606): "Halfway down, Hangs one that gathers samphire"; a 'dreadful trade' that could also encompass egg-collecting. The samphire was shipped to London in barrels of seawater to be sold to wholesalers at four shillings a bushel.

Samphire-collecting made good copy for Victorian popular magazine writers: a dramatic location, stranded collectors, imminent jeopardy and anxious families were all invoked. In a much-repeated tale, shipwrecked sailors who found themselves benighted on a wave-swept rock were reassured by the presence of samphire that the stormy sea tide would rise no further. It took a contemporary parson (J D Davies) not to moralise religiously on this story but to point out the unforeseen usefulness of some botanical know-how.

Other samphires

By the early 1800s the previous centuries of over-collection had led to similar-looking seashore plants being used to bulk out the increasingly scarce samphire. *Inula crithmoides*, (so-called golden samphire, Asteraceae, or Compositae) is relatively tasteless and would have been obvious to detect. *S. europaea* (glasswort) was plentiful in upper parts of salt marshes near ports, such as the Thames and Medway estuaries, and was widely used. It was historically known not so much as a food or a medicine but as a source of soda ash (sodium carbonate) for the

glass and soap industries. Anyone who has seen these plants in rough weather will grasp that they both share a useful evolutionary adaption. Their narrow leaves shrug off the drag of receding waves which might otherwise break up them up. Gerard accurately likens glasswort to a 'a branch of corall', while a Welsh name for rock samphire, corn carw'r môr, highlights its antler-like appearance of its stems and leaves.

Gradually glasswort, or marsh samphire, began appearing on dining tables further afield than its immediate natural locales. "Often sold under the name of Samphire, and made into a pickle," judged Reverend Davies, reflecting many similar contemporary comments, "but far inferior to the genuine samphire which is never found except on the rocks". Where there has previously been some ambiguity expressed, documentary evidence makes it clear that book references to samphire before the early 19th century can be assumed to refer to rock samphire. Any confusion was brought in with its widespread adulteration or substitution with glasswort.

Decline of trade

Despite the inevitable decline of the samphire trade, Shakespeare's vivid word painting had gained a cultural currency; 'everyone' knew the quote. Jane Austen to P G Wodehouse and beyond (via Dr Johnson, Keats, Coleridge and Byron) all alluded to the 'dreadful' samphire trade and so it continued to live in the language long after its official demise. With the present-day international trade in cultivated marsh samphire, there is now a sad confusion between the two seashore plants. The name transference appears complete when a leading supermarket chain displays imported glasswort in packaging marked simply 'samphire'. It is an odd fate for a name whose ultimate root, via an allusion to Saint Peter, is 'plant of the rocks'.

Uses

Rock samphire appears on the UK and European 'Red Lists' of species under threat but given a 'Least Concern' status. I collect leaves from an established colony on the top of the local sea wall. However some commercial collection restrictions are in place in vulnerable European habitats such as the Balearic Islands, where the taste for pickled rock samphire is great. Traditionally known as 'the poor man's capers' it accompanies the popular Majorcan dish of bread and olive oil, and it is as a seasoning it is perhaps best approached for the first time. In the UK it has been traditionally used as a flavouring in Cornwall's stargazey pie; certainly pickled rock samphire is very good with oily fish such as herrings and sardines. At its best the food writer Colin Spencer described it as a 'revelation of taste'.

In our weight-challenged times a revival has been suggested of the historical use of rock samphire tea against obesity. There seems to have been historic precedent to the use of the tangy volatile oil in some present-day soaps and cosmetics (as opposed to marsh samphire's past use in production of soap mass). In the form of an extract, new claims for skin replenishment have followed academic research. One major soap manufacturer describes the addition of commercial rock samphire extract as 'helping to produce a feeling of well-being on the skin or hair'; a use known to the ancient Romans.

Part of the Dover coast was christened Shakespeare's Cliff at some point in the past to commemorate the 'samphire-gatherer' scene in *King Lear*. This may be described as life-imitating-art-imitating-art as the scene is actually set on a heath; the Dover prospect being conjured up by a character who is benevolently deceiving his blinded father. The country's newest land acquisition has been constructed under this cliff with the spoil from the construction of the Channel Tunnel. This spit of land has been named Samphire Hoe and transformed into a nature reserve; its sea wall newly planted with what might be described as the true Shakespearian samphire.

Selected References

- Pliny's *Natural History*, Volume VII Books XXIV–XXVII. Loeb Classical Library, 1956
- John Quincy. *Pharmacopoeia officinalis et extemporanea*. London 1719.
- A Brife description of Ireland Made in this yeere 1589* by Robert Payne, The Irish Archaeological Society, Volume 1 1841
- Cornara L, La Rocca A, Marsili S, Mariotti M G. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 125, 2009
- Traditional uses of plants in the Eastern Riviera*, *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 125, 2009
- Rev J D Davies. *A History of West Gower*, Swansea 1877-1894
- Colin Spencer. *The Magical Samphire, Disappearing Foods, Oxford Symposium of Food & Cookery*, 1994
- Andrew Chevallier. *Encyclopedia of Medicinal Plants*, Dorling Kindersley, 2001
- Caucanas M, Montastier C, Piérard G E, Quatresooz P. *Dynamics of skin barrier repair following preconditioning by a biotechnology-driven extract from samphire (Crithmum maritimum) stem cells. Journal of Cosmetic Dermatology*, 10(4), 2011
- Joshua Watts. *The Museum of History*, New Haven 1832