

# Picture Perfect Persicarias

Kim Hurst of the Cottage Herbery in praise of a favourite family of herbs



On the wall above my desk hangs a watercolour of a small selection of the herbs we grow. It was painted by our very talented friend Charlotte Walter as the front cover of a booklet, which I put together back in the days of exhibiting at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. Central to the picture is a sprig of *Persicaria odorata*, which Charlotte captured beautifully in its high summer colour, when the plants leaves have a distinctive russet red lipstick kiss marking on the leaves. *Persicarias* are high on the list of one of our favourite genus and we have many, but its as herb growers that the edible forms interest us most, especially a certain trio.

First up *Persicaria bistorta* syn. *Polygonum bistorta* commonly known as Bistort. In our previous garden Bistort grew with health and abundant vigour, enjoying the semi-shaded position in the moisture retentive soil, which was a gift for the native herbs we grew there.

A hardy sturdy herbaceous *Persicaria* producing a wealth of leaves in early spring, which is the best time to eat them, when they are young and tender. One particular dish known as Easter Ledges pudding uses these young leaves shredded, mixed with fresh young nettle leaves plus other spring herbs of family preference then added to beaten egg. This mixture was then poured over a base of oatmeal and barley, then oven baked creating a dish of sustenance and a herbal spring tonic.

Historically the roots were used often in times of hardship for their high starch content helping to stave off starvation.

However, what about being garden worthy? Well that comes with the appearance in spring of the ramrod tight buds that push through the leaves reaching about 35cm before opening out into 'easy on the eye' pink shaggy flowers. These are usually 6/8cm long and vary in thickness, they last about 3 to 4 weeks depending on the seasonal weather. Often in late summer you get a bonus second less vigorous flush of flowers.

Division of the rootstock in early spring is advisable to keep the plants from developing woody crowns which reduces the production of flowers and all round general performance.

Secondly, *Persicaria odorata* and now for something deliciously exotic known as Vietnamese Coriander to us because of the taste being very like coriander. It is a native of south East Asia where it grows profusely in the wild in mostly damp moisture retentive ditches, on stream banks and around ponds. However, this *Persicaria* is not frost hardy and is best grown as a potted herb in temperate climates.

Our stock plants only leave the glasshouse when there is no threat of frost. Easily cared for growing in our own coir peat-free growing medium and fed regularly with our own organic liquid feed we can grow substantial plants that will fill a 10 litre pot in one season.

Do encourage new growth as these young leaves have the better sweeter flavour, ageing leaves become much stronger in flavour and slightly bitter which is not to every ones taste.

One plant can grow and produce enough leaves for our own consumption throughout a season, if we have a reasonably warm spring, summer and autumn. Pot on before plants start to show signs of stress.

One piece of advise for growing this *Persicaria* would be to always keep a few cuttings going especially through the unpredictable winters we tend to have. When taking cuttings make sure you include a piece with a node attached, this will form roots when placed in water within days.



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Photo: Plant Hunters' Fairs



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Photo: Kim Hurst

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In Asia it is commonly known as ‘Laska leaves’, Vietnamese Mint due to its rampant growth habit and Rau Ram by the Vietnamese. Wherever migrant Vietnamese have journeyed they have taken a few sprigs of this herb with them as it is essential to the flavour of their cuisine.

There are so many dishes in which to use this herb but one that always seems the most appropriate to extol its use in is the Vietnamese spring roll. The main ingredient is dry fried minced pork with finely chopped spring onion, chilli to taste, seasoning and a whole leaf of *Persicaria odorata* all rolled up in a rice pancake and steamed, delicious street food.

Thirdly, *Persicaria hydropiper* var. *rubra*. This plant heralds from Japan, where it is known as Azebu-tade, we know it as Red Hot Water Pepper, another name is Marsh Pepper Knotweed, as its names suggest it likes moisture. It grows in damp places and shallow water. The green wild form can be found in the wild in Australia, New Zealand, temperate Asia and North America.

An attractive decorative bronze/red high glossed leaved member of the genus which again although perennial is frost tender. We grow this from cuttings in the spring as soon as we see the stock plants showing signs of growth or by seeds which we sow fresh off the plants as soon as they are ripe, overwintering the seed trays in a frost free glasshouse.

As not to repeat myself the growing of this *Persicaria* is the same as the *odorata*, one tip is to never let it dry out, better to err on the damp side. It makes a very attractive pot plant especially when it flowers in July through to September, these are diminutive, delicate, pink, floral scented and numerous.

The leaves are hot, pungent and peppery to the taste being used in Japanese salads, soups and in freshwater fish dishes only. The young sprouted seeds are called ‘beni-tade’ and used as sashimi garnish. While the dried seeds are added to wasabi, made into a peppery condiment and the young fresh seeds used as a salad garnish.

Kim Hurst runs The Cottage Herbery with husband Rob and is the author of “Hidden Histories Herbs – 150 Herbs” published by Timber Press



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