

Conservation Corner

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“What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have never been discovered.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

Here at Conversation we’re gearing up for our annual Jr. Naturalist Day Camp. This year’s adventure, Back to Nature, will be held July 31 through August 2. We invite all area and visiting K-6th grade students to join us at the Nature Center for activities, games, crafts, snacks and a field trip to Kenu Park in Okoboji. Registration forms may be found on our webpage or picked up at the office or area libraries.

As we travel Back to Nature, we’ll visit several stories and secrets of nature unfolding right here in Pocahontas County, including the virtues of plants. At a recent neighborhood housewarming, my cousin mentioned she had spent the morning hoeing rubber weeds that had pretty much taken over the landscaping on their acreage. Now, we have many family names for weeds such as iron weed or sale barn weed, but rubber weed? Turns out she was referring to *Portulaca oleracea* or common purslane and this week’s encounter with the plant world.

Purslane looks and feels different than any other weed. Native to the Old World and North America, it is one of the world’s most abundant weeds and thrives around human activity as it grows in sidewalk cracks, flower beds, roadsides, or any disturbed ground. Purslane, an annual succulent, lays right on the ground surface as it branches and spreads to form a thick mat. Purslane has tiny yellow flowers, a green fruit capsule, and tiny, black, comma-shaped seeds. As any gardener knows, the tiniest piece of root will regrow.

But did you know purslane is also edible and a traditional vegetable in many cultures such as Mexican, Mediterranean, and Indian cooking? Its leaves and stems may be eaten fresh, lightly steamed, or added to salads, soups, and omelets for tang and texture. Though low in calories, Purslane is a super-food – higher in omega-3 fatty acids than any other leafy vegetable with seven times more beta-carotene than carrots and six times more Vitamin E than spinach. Purslane is also high in Vitamins A, C, and B Complex as well as a natural remedy for insomnia.

Another secret botanists have recently discovered is that purslane is the only C4 plant known to switch to CAM photosynthesis. Like sugar cane and corn, purslane uses the C4 pathway to save on water while maximizing sunlight. But, like succulents and cacti, purslane can also switch to the CAM pathway, allowing it to respire at night, store carbon, and perform photosynthesis with its stomata closed. No wonder it thrives here in wet and/or dry Iowa.

In his book *Incredible Wild Edibles*, Samuel Thayer sums up purslane like this. Few plants in the garden provide so much good food for such a long season. Few of them rival its nutritional density. None of them beat its delicious tang and succulent crunch. Nearly all of them take a lot more work to grow. After all, if you can’t beat ‘em, eat ‘em.

