

## AoB Blog

### 80 shades of plants...

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[Around the world in 80 plants](http://permanentpublications.co.uk/port/around-the-world-in-80-plants-an-edible-perennial-vegetable-adventure-for-temperate-climates-by-stephen-barstow/). Stephen Barstow. 2014. Permanent Publications  
<<http://permanentpublications.co.uk/port/around-the-world-in-80-plants-an-edible-perennial-vegetable-adventure-for-temperate-climates-by-stephen-barstow/>>



AROUND THE WORLD  
IN 80 PLANTS



<<http://i2.wp.com/aobblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/80Plants-Cover-2.jpg>> I normally have to request copies of books to review, but for this one I was *invited* to review a copy. Suitably intrigued by the book's title – and a little flattered to have been selected for this privilege (it was – read on!), I assented and this is my appraisal of Stephen Barstow's *Around the world in 80 plants* [hereinafter referred to as *80 Plants*].

Like an episode of that hardy perennial BBC radio show, [Gardeners' Question Time](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qp2f) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qp2f>> [a British broadcasting 'institution'], one of the first things you read in *80 Plants* is climate information for the author's garden, in Norway. Where winter is "seldom below -20 °C", and the mean monthly temperatures range from -3 °C in January to + 15 °C in July... Well, it is in Norway, after all! This cool reception belies the warmth (and erudition) that is the hallmark of this charming book. *80 Plants* is a veritable – or, should that be, *vegetable?* – plant odyssey, recounting one man's undoubted passion for rooting out – wherever on or in Earth they may be found – growing, and

eating plants. In his own personal quest vegetarian Barstow has already morphed, from somebody with a doctorate in 'waves' from Heriot-Watt University (Scotland, UK) to "Extreme Salad Man" (after having created a salad using 537 varieties) and national co-ordinator of the Norwegian Seed Savers organisation.

Although declaredly and primarily a gardening – *not* foraging – book, and not really a cookbook (though it does include many recipes – after all, why grow these plants if you aren't going to eat them?), *80 Plants* gives detailed descriptions of around 80 of Barstow's favourites (restricted to those vegetables that provide 'leafy greens'), most of which he uses in a normal year (or which have thrived in his garden's relatively cold climate). In an age where we are concerned about global food security and where there is not enough talk about using heirloom varieties or orphan crops, Barstow's work shows what is possible if we are a little more imaginative – adventurous even – in what we choose to eat (whether vegetarian or not!), wherever we may live on this edible planet. Accordingly, the author takes the reader on a gastro-botanical journey around the globe (and which therefore complements Kew's Global Kitchen Cookbook). As an armchair companion to Barstow's global travels we are treated to the book's sub-title "An edible perennial vegetable adventure in temperate climates". The different 'legs' of that journey are covered in the book's 6 chapters thus...

West and Central Europe: sets the tone for the book when Barstow begins with fascinating insights – historical, literary, etc. – on rock samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*) which apparently also has potential as an oil seed crop, and whose sudden appearance along Norway's southern cliffs in 2000 may be a visible consequence of climate change. We also find out what vegetable should be elevated to the status of a national treasure in England, and are introduced to the notion of the pseudo-asparagus. Clearly, there is a special place in the author's heart for stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) at 5.5 pages (although this account is bested by the 11 pages devoted to dandelion!).

Southern Europe and the Mediterranean: with some amazing multi-species recipes – e.g. pistich which

contains up to 56 spp., the same number as in a vegetarian calzone, a sort of folded-over pizza (with full listing of floristic ingredients in Appendix 2). This chapter also features artichokes (globe not Jerusalem) and asparagus (true asparagus here, none of those pseudo versions), Vitamin C-rich lesser celandine (which do contain a toxin so need to be prepared properly before consuming – leave death-defying munching on raw leaves to experts like Barstow...), and hops (so not just for flavouring ale then!).

Caucasus, Himalayas and Siberia: includes probably the book's most exotic species for UK-based readers and highlights *Hablitia tamnoides* (a monotypic genus in the Chenopodiaceae), which was formerly cultivated and used in Scandinavia and which has now been elevated to national heritage plant status in Norway. Eat this and you absorb a little of the plant lore of our forefathers (for there's probably a little Viking in many of us in the British Isles...).

Far East and Australasia: even more exotics, but does also include more familiar plants such as *Hosta* spp., *Allium*, *Aster* spp., *Malva* spp. and *Sonchus* spp. And it is here that we hear that the wasabi that is offered in many Japanese restaurants is more likely to be an imposter made from horse-radish, mustard and food colouring [i.e. a wasabi-wannabe...]. It is unlikely to be the esteemed product of *Wasabia japonica* since true wasabi tends to be rather expensive. It's also nice to see a recipe for Japanese knotweed, one of the most pernicious introduced alien species in the UK, a 'gourmet nuisance plant' indeed!

The Americas: an area we are told that has unusually few leafy perennial vegetables, but Barstow manages to find 10 to illustrate this section including *Gunnera* ('giant rhubarb', not rhubarb, but definitely giant...), hogweed (*Heracleum* spp.), and *Tradescantia* spp. As if to underling his comment regarding paucity of leafy pereveg [short for perennial vegetables – well, if Barstow can make up new words e.g. dandinoodles – cooked dandelion stalks, why can't I?], this selection includes ostrich fern (*Matteucia struthopteris*). Not only that but there are more than 4.5 pages on this non-angiosperm, and – no doubt to the annoyance of vegetarians everywhere – also includes a recipe for ostrich fern AND salmon. Back to 'proper plant's and this leg of the journey gives a good mention to *Typha latifolia* which not only has carbohydrate-rich rhizomes (oops – not leafy, but worth being reminded of), but an oil is obtained from its seed (non-leafy alert again), and its pollen is used as flour (!)

Journey's end is – and, since all travellers must come back home (even if adopted) eventually, where else other than... – Norway and Sweden. Here Barstow showcases angelica, several more *Allium* spp. (which feature in the book's second non-vegetarian recipe of tjeremsha served with caviar...), *Rumex acetosa*, ground elder and rhubarb (not giant but certainly proper rhubarb this time...).

*80 Plants* has entertained, informed and enlightened, and enriched my appreciation of the value of wild plants. We have been introduced to some new terms such as: [edimentals](http://www.edimentals.com/blog/) <<http://www.edimentals.com/blog/>> – edible ornamentals; quelites – edible weeds – in southwest USA and Central America; cryptocrops – useful weeds; thongs (root cuttings of sea kale), and bastard digging. Along the way *80 Plants* has also challenged one's views of whether Japanese knotweed and ground elder are really weeds in the sense of 'plants that are without use'. This delightful book may change your perception of 'common or garden' plants, too.

*80 Plants* concludes with Appendix 1, a plant table with alphabetical listing of scientific names of plants mentioned (so you'll need to refer to the original entries to find common names) including habitat, main harvest information and edimental status (on a scale of 1-5, but I couldn't find an indication of what the scale actually meant); Bibliography and references (c. 6 pp.), and 6 pages of 4-columned Index. Abundantly illustrated in colour throughout – and with pictures usually taken by the author, you have that extra reassurance that Barstow has seen that of which he writes. At 284 pages (+ xviii), *80 Plants* is a relatively slim volume, but it is crammed full of interesting vegetable tit-bits (although it does include a Disclaimer, for those inclined to nibble in the author's footsteps, so to speak).

I still don't know why I was invited to review this book, but I'm pleased I was! And next time Dr Barstow's off on his travels and needs somebody to carry his bags, he can certainly give me a call!

## References

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