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Opening Extract from...

Pure Style

Recipes for Every Day

Written by Jane Cumberbatch

Published by Pavilion

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Jane Cumberbatch's
Recipes for Everyday



For Alastair, Tom, Georgie, Gracie
and my parents John and Jean

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Jane Cumberbatch's Recipes for Everyday

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introduction

I love to cook, to garden and to make things. This book is a visual and written notebook of my ideas and recipes, spanning the seasons and including the ways in which I try to make daily life as simple and pleasing as possible. Some people are hard-wired to do complicated algorithms or run marathons, but I can't imagine a life without making things and putting my stamp on something. I suppose it's my way of making sense of the world, of keeping some control. There's not much we can do about the big stuff, but there's an awful lot we can do that's satisfying, such as baking a cake, growing some beans, or giving a new look to a piece of furniture with a lick of paint.

This book is very much part of my Pure Style philosophy, which is about being economical without skimping on essential things such as good food. It is not all about slavishly following fashion. It's about being practical and resourceful and it's about enjoying all the good things in a simpler way. I want the reader to be inspired, just as I am, by the ordinary and everyday aspects of life, such as making toast or cutting a rose.

Putting all of the following words, pictures and ideas into context, I should say that it all started with my mum, who taught me how to make everything from a sponge cake to a summer dress for school. Along the way, I've been like a kind of design sponge, absorbing ideas wherever I've seen or read about something that thrills me

I'd like to say, too, that everything in this book has been (or is being) test-driven by me and my family in homes that have ranged from a rickety Georgian terrace house in east London to a bleached white farmhouse in southern Spain to our current home, with its old-fashioned roses and tall Victorian sash windows. My ongoing passion and project, for further inspiration and lessons in cooking the perfect sardine, is another white-washed space that we are restoring in Olhão, a salty seaside fishing town in the Algarve, Portugal.

Jane Cumberbatch

artwork at repr
for scanning





Good things to eat in spring: rhubarb, leeks, purple sprouting broccoli, spring greens, new potatoes, carrots, asparagus, spring lamb, mackerel, oysters, watercress, broad beans, wild garlic, elderflower, eggs.

spring



What bliss it is when I can first walk barefoot on the grass and lie face up in the sun's warming rays. Listening to a blackbird singing its heart out or soaking up the visual balm of a tree in blossom lessens the sting of a parking ticket or some other urban irritant. In his book *In Praise of Slow*[1], Carl Honoré exorts us to slow down and seek to live at what musicians call *tempo giusto* – the right speed. It's about trying to live better in a fast-paced modern world. Paying attention to what is going on in the renewal of nature – watching the buds pushing upwards or limp leaves unfurling, for example – is a simple pleasure that is free and a world away from consumer hype.

SWEET BROAD BEANS AND LIME GREEN SHOOTS

'Spring is when life's alive in everything.'
Christina Rossetti



Against the garden's winter wreckage, green shoots poking through the earth are optimistic signs of spring where only four weeks ago a white blanket of snow lay. After months of nature's inertia, suddenly everything seems possible. I can even find the motivation to sort through and dust down the dark innards of the larder: bailing out the dregs of jam jars and cereal boxes; clearing away saggy sweet potatoes, tired onions and other vegetables that I haven't been quite as organized at using up as I should have been; and putting in order the muddle of cans, packets, bags of rice and pulses. I feel productive and energized, as if coming out of hibernation.

A first day of spring risotto

serves 4–6

(see page 165 for Mushroom risotto)

In tune with the spring mood, what we love to eat is risotto with green peas, broad beans and asparagus. This one is inspired by the classic Italian *risotto primavera*.

It's best if you can lay your hands on fresh pods but frozen peas (petit pois are sweetest) and frozen young broad beans are acceptable. And if the asparagus element is impossible (it might not be available or you might not feel justified in using airfreighted spears), you can just leave it out and add a few more peas and beans. Try to use a heavy-based saucepan to stop the rice sticking and a wooden spoon for the vigorous stirring that is the key to a successful risotto.

1½ tbsp olive oil
75g/3oz/¾ stick unsalted butter
1 onion, finely chopped
6 spring onions, finely chopped
2 garlic cloves, chopped
300g/10oz/scant 1½ cups risotto rice
150ml/¼ pint/⅔ cup white wine

1.2 litres/2 pints/5 cups hot chicken or vegetable stock
8 asparagus spears, chopped into 2cm (¾-inch) pieces
200g/7oz/1¾ cups shelled peas
200g/7oz/1½ cups shelled broad beans
fresh mint leaves, torn
50g/2oz/½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Heat the oil and half the butter. Add the onion, spring onions and garlic and cook over a medium heat for about 10 minutes until soft. Add the rice and stir for a couple of minutes to coat the grains in oil. Add the wine and start adding the hot stock a ladleful at a time, stirring continuously (resist pleas, however plaintive, for help with homework, or from a hungry dog – stirring is the key to a good risotto).

After 15 minutes add the asparagus and keep stirring and adding stock for 5 more minutes. Add the remaining vegetables and cook the bubbling and steaming contents for a further 5 minutes, adding the stock as necessary.

It's ready when the rice goes creamy, but not to the point of soggy; the grains should retain a chewy al dente quality. Turn off the heat. Season to taste with salt and freshly ground black pepper, stir in the remaining butter and the torn mint leaves and leave to rest for a few minutes with the lid on.

Serve with grated Parmesan, ideally immediately, but if you are thwarted by domestic drama, don't worry – the risotto will not be a disaster if it sits in the pan for another 15 minutes or so.

A new look for spring

The simplest thing you can do to change the look in your space is to give it a new coat of paint.

Now that spring has sprung and sunlight is dancing all over the house again I can see just how grimy and grubby everything is, especially in the kitchen. There's no need for home to be the perfect domestic palace, but equally a greasy oven isn't exactly uplifting. So, like retouching grey roots, a spot of simple spring-cleaning can be a brilliant reviver of the spirits, as well as keeping everything in good nick.

Nowadays of course we must use bleach and other noxious cleaning materials only sparingly, but a simple bucket of hot water, a little detergent and a sponge is the underpinning for dealing with most tasks.

There is also satisfaction in having a good sweep with a bristle broom or making mirrors sparkle with a rag soaked in vinegar. I might even pursue the idea from a 19th-century guide to domesticity that suggested sweeping with tea leaves 'not only to lay the dust but also to give a slightly fragrant smell to the room'.







Good uses for distilled white vinegar:

window cleaner
fabric softener
air freshener
stain remover
weedkiller
loo cleaner
drain cleaner
wallpaper remover
grease cutter
furniture polish
limescale remover
glue solvent

Good uses for apple cider vinegar:
nit remover
treatment for sunburn
ear cleaner
insect repellent
relief for stings

Going back to the greasy oven – say goodbye to suffocating foam – it can be made wholesome and shiny again with non-toxic cleaners or even your own eco paste made from borax and water. And if, like me, you have open shelving for plates and glasses above the cooker, the whole lot will need a good wash after a winter of roasts and cheese on toast. For this task, and all other washing up, I can't think of anything better than tough white and blue striped linen tea towels.

And if I don't have the inclination or energy to do any of the above, it's enough simply to fling the windows wide open and let out the fug to give my mood a boost.

In the same way that the female whitewashers in Andalucia appear with the first wild peonies, as the sticky buds unfurl like limp chickens' feet in Tulse Hill, south London, it's time for me to get out my painting shirt.

How to paint

The days are longer, putty and other materials are not in danger of setting too hard to work with, and if it's an outside job there's hopefully less chance of rain stopping play. Like learning how to bake a cake, or any other basic cooking task, it is very useful to learn how to paint.

Dip the brush in the paint to cover half the bristle length. Wipe off any excess paint on the side of the tin. Lay the paint on by applying a horizontal band approximately 20cm (8 inches) wide and brush it out sideways.

Finish with light strokes in a criss-cross pattern. Hold a small paintbrush like a pencil but hold a large paintbrush like a beach bat.

If using a roller, load it with paint by pushing it back and forth in the front of the tray, then do the same on the slope of the tray to spread the paint evenly over the roller. Roll slowly and evenly until the area is covered.

All about colour

The theory of colour can be as off-putting as a long-winded recipe in a fancy cookbook for something as simple as tomato soup. Why make life more convoluted than it already is? It is enough to say here that the light-reflecting qualities of colour are the most significant.

Here are some key pointers: Think carefully about the aspect of a room. North-facing rooms are darker and need warm colours such as soft yellows. South-facing rooms can have harsh shadows so cooler blues and greens will work well. Rooms facing east are warmer in the morning with more yellow light from the sunrise, which cools as the day progresses. Walls that have direct light appear light and walls that surround a window fall into shadow so colours will appear darker.

Some green rooms

What with all the buds in the garden and delicious greens in the vegetable basket, it's easy to get inspired about using leafy hues around the home. It might be obvious, but it is because of its association with nature that green is one of the most accommodating colours for interiors. And when described on the paint charts with tempting culinary imagery, such as 'pea', 'cooking-apple green', 'bean', and 'cabbage', a green theme is even more inviting.

Go easy on the light, bright end of the green spectrum – perfect for a hyacinth stalk, acidic lime green all over a room is hard on the eye and stomach. Duller greens that make me think of olives or a field in winter are timeless, quiet and look as good in a country cottage as in a more modern environment. White bed linen or chair covers look crisp and fresh against these more muted green shades.

Recently I painted a north-facing room (see page 14) in a deep citrine green, which I was worried about embarking on, being such a lover of white, but the effect is rich and enveloping, almost like being in the garden. This use of wraparound colour in one shade creates continuity and has made the proportions of this small room actually seem larger. To introduce some contrast I have used paler shades of a blue-green to paint chairs and a simple junk table.

Greens look great in the kitchen, too. I recommend a pale chalky mint green as a soothing backdrop for cooking and working.

Wild things

The bedding is airing under a sheet of blue sky and I have flung open every door and window to blow away months of fustiness. This is the sort of day to go out with a pair of scissors to snip a handful of wild garlic or young nettle heads. Add to this the hunter-gatherer pleasure of returning with a fistful of greenery for the pot.

Wild garlic soup
(see page 15)

Abundant in country woods, it's not unusual in spring to find the fresh green and white froth of wild garlic – ransoms – in a suburban back garden. My brother-in-law Jonny's dad lives in north London and he has a shady spot by the shed with a useful carpet of this garlicky-scented greenery. Eat wild garlic leaves raw in salads or as a garnish (wash well in case the dog, cat, badger or fox has decorated them in passing). The leaves will keep for several days in the refrigerator, but they bruise easily so handle gently.

Alternative uses:

Substitute wild garlic for basil in a pesto (see page 110). You can also cook it as you would spinach and enjoy it as a vegetable, or chop and mix with home-made beef burgers (see page 125).

25g/1oz/¼ stick unsalted butter
2 leeks, trimmed and roughly chopped
1.2 litres/2 pints/5 cups vegetable stock
1kg/2lb potatoes, peeled and roughly chopped
generous handful of wild garlic leaves, well washed and roughly chopped
3–4 tbsp crème fraîche
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Melt the butter in a heavy-based saucepan and cook the chopped leeks gently for 5 minutes until soft. Add the stock and simmer on a medium heat for about 10 minutes. Add the potatoes and simmer for a further 15-20 minutes, or until they are just cooked through.

Blend half the soup, either in a liquidizer or with a hand-held blender, then pour back into the soup. This gives it a chunky consistency; for a smoother texture, liquidize the whole lot.

Add the wild garlic and simmer for a few more minutes. Season to taste and serve with dollops of crème fraîche.

Nettle soup

I pick young green nettles when they're a fizz of pale green leaves sprouting through still bare patches of wintry ground. This is when they're at their tenderest.

Expert instructions from the 'Dig for Victory' campaign in World War II:

'To gather them without being stung you can wear an old glove between February and June. Put them into a pail under your tap and twirl them around well using a piece of wood – when the nettles are thoroughly wet, they lose the power of stinging you. There is no fear of them stinging the throat once boiling water has touched them.'

1 tbsp olive oil
2 onions, finely chopped
2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
1.2 litres/2 pints/5 cups vegetable stock
500g/1lb potatoes, peeled and finely chopped
2 gloved handfuls of young nettle heads, washed
150ml/¼ pint/⅔ cup double cream
salt and freshly ground black pepper

Heat the olive oil and cook the onions and garlic in a heavy-based saucepan for 5 minutes or so, until soft. Add the stock and simmer for 10 minutes.

Add the potatoes and nettles (do remember the gloves) and simmer for a further 10 minutes or so until the potatoes are tender.

Liquidize, season to taste, and stir in the cream.

Elderflower champagne

makes about 2 litres

Back in the 1970s my dad and uncle were always experimenting with homemade brews using the recycled bottles from the box in the shed. My father's blackberry wine was dangerously alcoholic, but my uncle's elderflower champagne was lethal: when I uncorked one bottle, such was the build-up of pressure that the neck broke and neatly sliced off part of my thumb. Happily, no such disaster occurred with my first attempt at making this fragrant and lightly fizzy drink, as I stuck to strong screw-top wine bottles, and let the pressure off every couple of days.

Elders
Elders are found in gardens, parks and on commons and waste ground. Flowering in late April and May, the delicate white blooms should be gathered when just out of bud.

2 litres/3½ pints/8 cups boiling water
500g/1lb/2½ cups granulated or caster sugar
rind and juice of 4 lemons
10 elderflower heads, in full bloom

Put the water and sugar into a clean bucket and stir until the sugar dissolves.

Add the lemon rind and juice and the elderflower heads and stir. Cover with clean muslin or a linen tea towel and leave to ferment in a cool place for 4–5 days.

Strain the liquid through a sieve lined with muslin and decant into sterilized strong glass bottles.

Wild asparagus

Although it is now protected in the UK, rough-tied, flopping bunches of wild asparagus are still a feature in the spring markets of Spain and Portugal. Foraging for wild asparagus *espárragos trigueros* among the hedgerows of the Sierra needs a sharp eye and is a fun way to teach children how to be more observant. The thin pencil-like spears are easily confused with grass if you don't look hard. They are like spindly versions of the cultivated stuff we normally eat.

Dandelion leaves

Before the pet rabbit gets them, follow the old French kitchen-garden tradition and pick the first young spring dandelion leaves to throw into a salad.

Ground elder

It is an understatement that many gardeners would wish worldwide annihilation of this rampant plant but if you can keep it relatively tamed, why not appreciate its pretty frothing white flower heads. The leaves can be steamed like spinach, eaten raw in salads or added to soups.



THE BEAUTIFUL AND USEFUL GARDEN



It occurs to me that William Morris's tenet *'Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful'* applies just as much to the garden as it does to the home. Fancy garden fashions come and go – leylandii, pampas grass, stripy lawns, decking and chained pergolas to name but a few horrors – but the most timeless kind of gardening is like timeless interior decoration: simple, natural and unpretentious. I am all for what the Japanese call '*wabi-sabi*', which identifies beauty with unpretentious, simple, unfinished, transient things. So there is '*wabi-sabi*' in plain buckets, in walls with blemishes and in rough weathered stones covered with lichen. As a '*wabi-sabi*' devotee you won't find me using high-pressure hoses to remove the moss from the brick in my back garden.

When you're planning your outside space, think of it as a room outside with a background canvas to highlight and complement whatever you plant in it. It goes without saying that the more natural the textures, the better. You might be lucky and have lovely old brick walls, or a classic cottage hedge. It's more likely, though, to be some kind of fencing which, even if it is in an unappealing varnish, can be updated with colour. It will look more natural if you choose muted greens rather than anything too bright and loud. This isn't a design rule written in stone, but you might find that an electric blue background may be fine for a Miami patio, but will look out of place in the softer light that we have in the UK.

I discovered the ideal green in a water-based paint from Cuprinol, which has become my default garden colour. Slapped on with a wide brush, across a muddle of mismatched trellis and fencing, it creates a simple unified backdrop to flowers and plants. This is the garden as a room outside.

Grand gardens are breathtaking and magnificent. If you can, do visit the baked and shady gardens of the Alcazar in Seville, Spain or Vita Sackville-West's languorous borders at Sissinghurst in Kent. But I am also drawn to more humble, informal and personal creations such as the traditional cottage garden with its mingling of ornamental and useful elements. This is the old-as-the-hills idea of

Some spring gardening tasks:

Sow hardy annuals outdoors.

Sow half-hardy annuals under cover.

Cover emerging shoots with fleece.

Sort seeds for sowing.

Sow broad beans outside.

Feed shrubs and climbers with a slow-release organic feed and work in bonemeal.

Prune roses with sharp secateurs; remove a percentage of old wood where you can to promote new wood, as a vigorous plant is less prone to disease.

Divide perennials such as agapanthus to make more plants: cut down the middle of the clump and prise apart with two forks before replanting. Slower-growing clump-forming perennials such as peonies can be left for many years before they decline. Prise the most vigorous outer sections away with a fork for replanting (you can also do this in autumn).

Trench the vegetable beds, and dig in compost or manure.

Hoe to keep up with the weeds.

Clear the beds of last year's skeletons.

self-sufficiency. It's a timeless way, too, when you see that what worked for one medieval gardening guru, the monk Alexander Needham, is just as relevant today for anyone planning a herb, vegetable and flower garden. *The English Cottage Garden* by Edward Haymans$_2$ records he dictated that: *'The garden should be adorned with roses and lilies, turnsole, violets and mandrake; there you should have parsley and cos, and fennel and southernwood and coriander, sage, savory, hyssop, mint, rue, dittany, smallage, pellitory, lettuce, garden cress, peonies. There should also be planted beds with onions, leeks, garlic, pumpkins and shallots, cucumber, poppy, daffodil and acanthus ought to be in a good garden. There should also be pottage herbs such as beets, herb mercury, orach, sorrel and mallows.'*

My mum had much of the medieval monk approach to our south London suburban garden, practising the wartime resourcefulness of her parents. There were raspberry canes squeezed between the roses, courgettes next to more herbs, and tubs of ripening tomatoes piled along a south-facing wall at the back of the house.

As a nascent gardener I followed, and armed with her wisdom, *The Gardening Year* by Reader's Digest, and bargain trays of plants from the Sunday flower market in London's Columbia Road, I crammed a postage-stamp-sized roof terrace with herbs, sweet peas and clematis against a backdrop of crumbling east London sheds and warehouses. My very English garden theme continued, with the addition of a good hat, high in the Andalucian Sierra, where – despite ferocious summer heat and freezing winters – climbing white roses, old-fashioned scented geraniums and sweet white jasmine flowers bloomed profusely around the white courtyard walls.

Now that we're UK based, I can concentrate on the long skinny vegetable patch in the sunniest part of the garden by the fence and my loose interpretation of an old-fashioned potager – a patchwork effect made of 16 small beds edged with recycled Victorian tiles and planted with rows of lavender and rosemary.

It is laid out with four standard rose trees in the middle and wigwams of climbing beans and nasturtiums at each corner. Pathways laid with shingle gravel between the beds are wide enough to fit a wheelbarrow. It is formal, yet informal, and can be quite out of hand without looking too much of a mess.

The aim is to always have something edible or beautiful, or both, out there. At the very least, I'll always have herbs to cook with, or to put in jugs for greenery at the table, even in the middle of winter, when the garden is stark and bare on the flower side of things.

In defence of weeds

'A weed is no more than a flower in disguise.' James Russell Lowell, American romantic poet and writer

Favourite wild things:

Bluebells: gorgeous porcelain-blue colour and heady scent – a 'strong sweet smell, somewhat stuffing the head' said the herbalist John Gerard. Juices from the plant stiffened Elizabethan ruffs, and glue from the flower stalks has been used for binding books or fixing feathers on arrows.

Lesser celandine: known as the 'spring messenger', it's a pretty yellow flower like a glossy buttercup, a favourite of the Flame Brocade moth, and once used for treating piles.

White dead-nettle: delicate white orchid-like flowers – described by John Gerard as a plant 'to make the heart merry'. Children used to make whistles from the stems, and in the north-east of England the leaves were often fed to young turkeys.

As with dealing with a backlog of greasy dishes, it's a chore to hack through the brambles and suckers that threaten to choke the flower beds. On the other hand (in my misguided opinion, as the more serious garden-minded will probably think) there are what I call the 'right' kind of weeds, which are as much a part of the garden as my pampered, old-fashioned roses.

I have no desire, therefore, to zap the sunny-coloured dandelions and the white daisies that decorate the glossy, velvety spring grass. Nor the clumps of cabbagey forget-me-nots, whose tiny and piercing cobalt-blue flowers are perfect for a simple table decoration with white dead-nettles. I love the gentle disorder and interest that the right kind of weeds can bring to the garden, like colourful gatecrashers at a formal party. And even scrubby patches of urban wasteland get their chance to bloom, in spring especially, as unexpected oases of wild beauty.

I prefer to think that weeds are just plants growing in the wrong place. Anyway, they have an entitlement to be doing all their growing as the descendants of naturally occurring wild flowers and plants. Our forebears, who were so much closer to nature, had a greater need of wild plants and linked them with superstitions and special powers. A culture of plant lore flourished, such as using feverfew against headaches and not taking hawthorn blossom into the house because it brings bad luck.

But any green invader has its limits. The overuse of fertilizers in the countryside has resulted in the stinging nettle being the most common plant in the English countryside because it can tolerate high levels of nitrogen. This is at the expense of more delicate plants, which are fighting to survive. Making more nettle soup (see page 18) will not exactly address the problem, but we can have a go.

And although I'm no xenophobe, there are some plant experts who are convinced that foreign plants are pushing Britain's wild flowers to extinction. Apparently nine of the ten fastest-spreading species were recently introduced from abroad. Some plants, such as the fen orchid and pennyroyal, barely survive outside nature reserves and SSSI (Sites of Special Scientific Interest). Even the cornflower is listed as endangered.

You can do your bit for native plants in your garden or allotment, and sow a bed of wild flowers to attract bees, butterflies and other insects. *This is one typical meadow mix from a packet of seeds:* Lady's bedstraw, meadow buttercup, corn chamomile, wild clary, cowslip, cranesbill, ox-eye daisy, foxglove, harebell, corn marigold, field scabious, teasel, toadflax.



Growing your own – a millionaire for a few pence

Trying to tame nature's fickleness is all part of the thrill of gardening. As much as the tending and nurturing of green things, it's our opportunity to create a dream view of the world. I'm with the mid-20th-century domestic goddess Constance Spry, who in her classic book *Simple Flowers – A Millionaire for a Few Pence* finds floral riches in a simple packet of seeds. How wonderful it would be if she could float down from the great garden in the sky and persuade all the teenage daughters in the land to give up dreams of Prada handbags, and get a longer lasting natural fix with a couple of quid spent on pots of nodding marigolds.

Even if the garden is a window box on a sill or a cluster of potted plants, it is so filled with the possibilities of pleasure. I cycle through bland Brixton estates and see optimistic hanging balcony gardens of Babylon, from a Bengali family's trailing beans and gourds to a hotchpotch of olive oil tins planted with tomatoes and mint belonging to a Greek contemplating tasty salads to serve with his grilled meat.

The serendipity of gardening also means you can do all the wrong things to a plant, and yet be surprised by a positive outcome, such as the desiccated lavender cutting I forgot all about that's now luxuriant and bushy, or bulbs planted at the last minute in January that still come up. Equally you can fuss and fret over your crop of prize tomatoes, but can't prevent some nasty black spot rot that destroys the lot.

Not everyone has the time or inclination to tend vegetables or any plant from seed, because, like looking after small children or a cat or a dog, it's rewarding, but requires effort. It is good, therefore, that there is the option of buying young plants to put straight into the ground or a container.

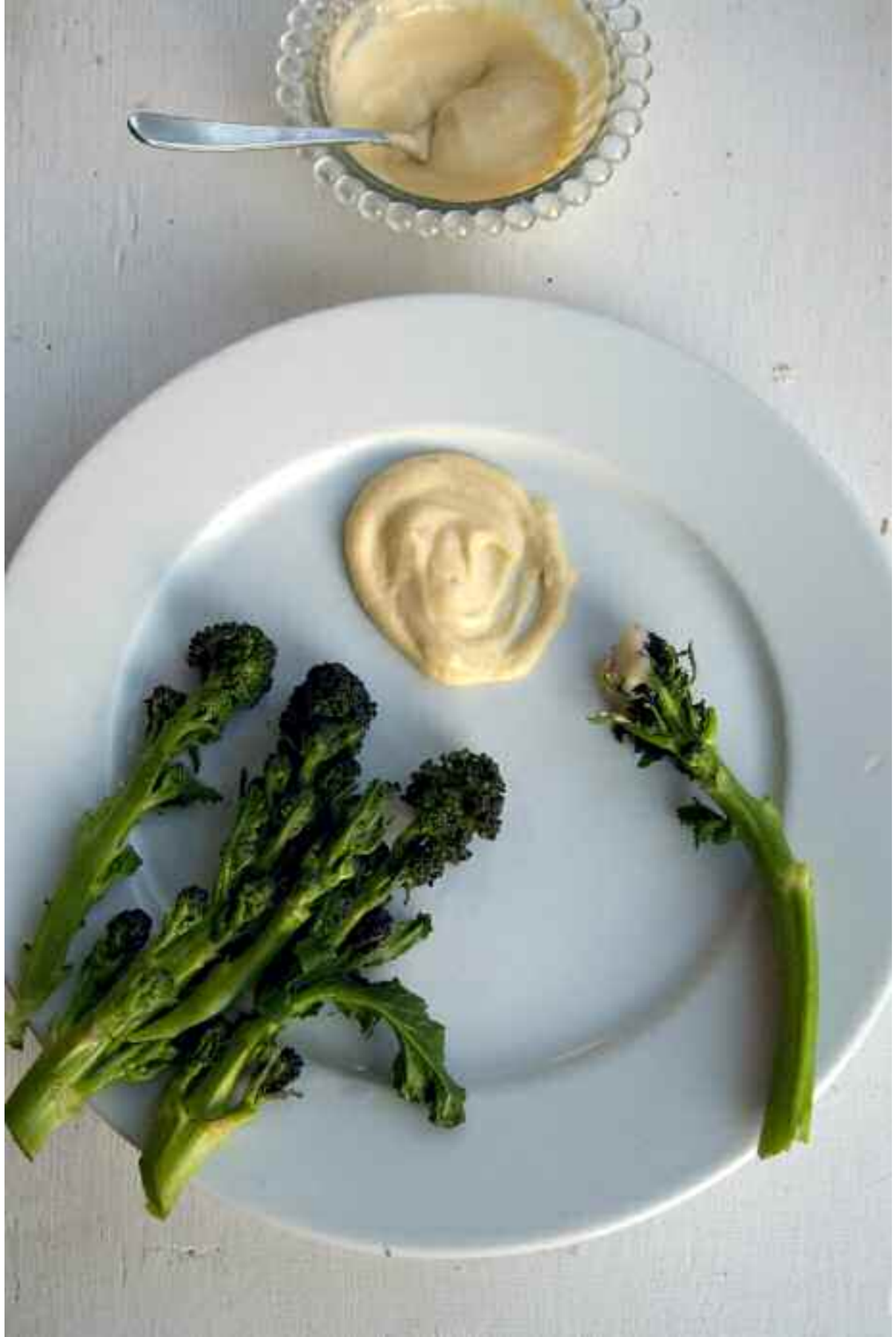
I always invest in some back-up plants in case of a seed disaster, especially the bean crop, which I would miss very much. The good sources are community allotments and plant stalls in markets. My tomatoes and French beans usually come from the local all-purpose hardware shop in the high street.

Spring greens and other seasonal vegetables

'The English have but three vegetables and two of them are cabbage.' Walter Hines Page, American ambassador to the Court of St James's

We have been through a bad patch in the kitchen ... for about the last couple of hundred years. But now? In our food enlightened culture, where cooking lessons have returned to school and fresh sweet green shoots and roots are everywhere,





slimy cabbage boiled and stirred to green rags – which my great grandmother was brilliant at – would be dumped in the (recycling) bin. Modern children are even being persuaded to eat up their greens when fresh and cooked with the new lightness of touch.

I wouldn't go so far as to say that I could live on cabbage, as it gets really tedious having the same food over and over – but if it were to be the season's very sweet and succulent spring greens, then let's say it wouldn't be a bad thing to have a daily plateful. These loose-leafed green cabbages without hearts need only a few seconds in boiling water. Use only their jade inner leaves; the bitter, dark green outer leaves should be ruthlessly stripped away. Alternatively, quickly stir fry them with garlic, or add to stews or hearty soups at the last moment. Spring greens are often sold with their mud, which all adds to the experience.

If you intend to be as ruthless as I suggest, buy about double the amount you think you will need. You can wash and strip the leaves down once home, then lightly dry and store them in the salad box of the refrigerator until needed.

Purple sprouting broccoli

I'm very sniffy about supermarket packed fruit and veg – don't you hate all that plastic packaging? But I'll make an exception for bobbly-headed spears of purple sprouting broccoli, which for some reason this year have been tricky to come by in the local greengrocer. And when I have found some they are quite often tired, floppy and dog-eared. The supermarket specimens, though, have been a triumph, but I will endeavour next year to pedal over to the farmers' market at my son's old school, where I know there won't be a limp leaf or plastic packet in sight.

Purple sprouting broccoli is in season roughly from January to May and, as with spring greens, is full of vitamin C, iron and fibre. When it is really fresh from picking, the spears snap cleanly. Other than picking off a few old leaves, the whole spear is edible. Try bunching them together with a band or piece of string and steam them standing up in the pan with the lid on for 10 minutes or so, as you might with asparagus, so that the flower buds don't overcook. Drain and eat as an exquisite spring lunch or supper dish with dollops of hollandaise (see left, and page 99 for the hollandaise recipe). The spears are also delicious tossed in melted butter, lemon and garlic, or served with a poached egg on top.