

## Intriguing World of Weeds

### Shepherd's-purse, *Capsella bursa-pastoris* (L.) Medic.<sup>1</sup>

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... on finding a root of shepherd's purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*) open a seed-vessel. If the seed is yellow you will be rich, but if green you will be poor.

*Yorkshire Folklore*, W.M.E. Fowler, 1909 (Vickery 1995)

#### INTRODUCTION AND ETYMOLOGY

Shepherd's-purse, *Capsella bursa-pastoris* (L.) Medic. is an annual or biennial winter herb in the Brassicaceae (mustard family). The Brassicaceae are herbaceous herbs found mainly in temperate and cold regions of the Northern Hemisphere. The family is composed of 376 genera and 3,200 species with centers of diversity in the Mediterranean and southwestern and central regions of Asia (Barkley 1986; Zomlefer 1994). *Brassica* was Pliny the Elder's (A.D. 23 to A.D. 79) name for the cabbage-type plants included in this family (Gledhill 1985). The genus *Capsella* is composed of five temperate species (Mabberley 1997). The genus name *Capsella* is Latin for "little box." The specific epithet *bursa-pastoris* means "shepherd's purse." Both names refer to the plant's distinctive purse-shaped seed pods (Gledhill 1985; Spencer 1957).



The plant appeared in medieval European herbals under the name *Bursa-pastoris* (Coles 1657; Dodoens 1578; Gerard 1636). Carolus Linnaeus assigned the name *Thlaspi pursa-pastoris* to shepherd's-purse in his *Species Plantarum* in 1753. Friedrich Casimir Medikus (1736 to 1808) assigned the currently accepted *Capsella bursa-pastoris* (L.) Medic. to shepherd's-purse in 1792. Nathaniel Lord Britton reclassified the plant as *Bursa bursa-pastoris* in 1894, but the name assigned by Me-

dikus has taken precedence (Britton and Brown 1913; Mabberley 1997).

The name "shepherd's-purse" is a literal translation of the Latin *bursa-pastoris*. The name comes from the seed pod that looks like the leather bags or purses shepherds carried around the waist for taking their meals to the field (de Bray 1978; Spencer 1957). The English "shepherdys purs" first appears in print in *Extracts from a Stockholm Medical MS.* around A.D. 1400. The name became widely used in European herbals of the 16th through the 18th centuries (Coles 1657; Dodoens 1578; Gerard 1636; Simpson and Weiner 1989). Other common names are related to the inverted heart shape of the pods. Schoolboys in the U.K. play a game by handing an unknowing playmate a plant of fruiting shepherd's-purse and asking them to pluck off one of the heart-shaped pods. When this is done they exclaim, "You've picked your mother's heart out!" This game is probably related to the local common name "Mother's heart" (Vickery 1995).

Clapped-pouch was a name used for shepherd's-purse in Ireland because the fruit resembled the leather wallets carried by licensed beggars and lepers who would stand at intersections with a bell, wooden clapper, and pouch asking the public to give money or be vilified. Peppergrass was a name given to shepherd's-purse in New England because of the burning sensation in the mouth caused by chewing the flowers (Skinner 1911). Many other common names have been applied to this plant around the world, including Blind weed, Case weed, Cowwort, English Shepherd's bag, Lady's purse, Pepperplant, Pepper-and-salt, Pickpocket, Pick-purse, Poorman's pharmacetty, Rattle pouches, Shepherd's heart, Shepherd's script, Shovelweed, St. James' weed, Toywort, Wind-flower, and Witches' pouches. *Bolsa de Pastor*, "bag of the shepherd," is the name commonly used in Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries (Britton and Brown 1913; de Bray 1978; Holm et al. 1991b; Spencer 1957; Vickery 1995).

#### DESCRIPTION

Plants in the Brassicaceae are annual, biennial, or perennial herbs with watery, acrid sap, a distinctive two-

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