

“Eat Your Vegetables!”

Most of us have that childhood directive on ‘tape’ and we may even have the memory of sitting at the table after everyone else has been excused, staring down those Brussels sprouts. Truly, today we are surrounded by a marvelous variety of vegetables in and out of season and the very best are those from your own garden.

Trite but true, you are what you eat: universally, the information on what constitutes a healthy diet advises us to balance our dinner plates, generous with fruits and vegetables, stingy with meat and processed foods. The problem is not that we do not know how to eat wisely, it is just that earlier habits have been set in concrete.

What each one of us eats may kill or cure us, but what we eat as a family, a group, a nation has a most remarkable importance. Eating habits actually have extensive consequences. I remember reading with dismay the news that rain forests were being cleared to raise beef for burgers, without any respect for the service provided by those rain forests in regulating climate. According to scientists, the resulting deforestation causes 15% of the global warming pollution world wide as well as hurting the people who rely on those forests for their livelihoods.

Recently I read that the French, hard to believe, had raised their consumption of hamburgers to new levels. The future of culinary excellence is surely in jeopardy if the French succumb to fast food!

Surely fixing vegetables for dinner is not that time-consuming, although the planting, weeding, and picking have to be squeezed into a busy schedule, even if a lot of the activity can be filed under “exercise” or “entertainment”. Among guidelines to follow in choosing what to plant, what you love to eat ranks first. Others include what is cheaper to grow than to buy, and what does well in your particular garden soil.

Tomatoes are on most ‘favorite’ lists because homegrown beats store-bought in taste. The tomato is actually an acid fruit (botanically a seed-bearing thing that develops from a flower) so canning them is not complicated, the effort repaid in the delight of rows of gleaming jars ready to enhance winter soups and sauces. Whether to begin with seeds or plants is the gardener’s choice.

Recently recommended have been tomato plants grown on grafted roots, but according to research done at the Rodale experimental farm, the grafted plants are no higher yielding nor better tasting than own-root tomatoes. The advantage of the grafted plants might be realized if you have poor soil or a spot subject to fungus or other ills.

In planting tomatoes, timing is important. If put into cold ground you may see purple foliage that tells you the plant is unable to take up phosphorus. Wait until a week or so past the last frost date for your neighborhood and plant deep, up to the first set of leaves. Roots will emerge from that lanky stem giving stability to the plant. Of course you know not to crowd them as good air circulation is vital, and they need a sunny, well- drained place. One friend puts them in a raised bed on wheels so her plants follow the sun around the house.

In choosing a plot to plant, remember that most tomato diseases lurk in the soil so rotate your crops. That includes avoiding not just spots where tomatoes grew but also areas where related species like peppers, eggplant, and potatoes grew. You can safely put them where beans or lettuce grew. Your garden pH is probably acidic (pH 6.2 to 6.8) if you’ve had success before but if you are breaking new ground, take a sample to send to Tech. The boxes with directions are available at the Extension Office on Carriage Court in Gloucester Courthouse.

Another down home favorite is asparagus, delicious proof of spring! Just as good eaten raw as it pops out of the ground. Asparagus is quickly cooked and in preparing it, if you bend it,

it will snap where the tough stem begins. The hardest part of growing this healthy charmer is to leave the first spring's production uncut to feed the roots. The next hardest is to keep the area weed free. Mulching with clean straw or salt hay does the trick.

Once planted you can harvest it for twenty years and the best way to begin is with crowns, the rhizomes with established roots; life is too short to potter about with seeds. Not only is this vegetable full of all sort of good-for-you elements but it is low calorie and has no fat, no cholesterol. It has become fashionable to choose skinny spears although the fatter ones taste better. For the skinny ones plant the crowns 8 to 12 inches apart; for fat ones, 12 to 24 inches apart.

In purchasing crowns select newer varieties that are more successful in this climate and more resistant to disease.

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