

Second Helpings

Whether the budget discussion concerns a new app for the magic cyberworld or new shoes for Easter, we all understand that underneath all the negotiable items lurks the absolute, good food! This spring, since years of drought in food producing states has resulted in higher prices, the home garden becomes an item in the family budget.

If you peruse the labels on the fruit and other produce you load into your grocery kart you realize that our food supply is worldwide. Unfortunately, friable land has not multiplied to adjust to the doubling of the world's population in the last century. This has created a significant problem for the future so the policies that determine what is grown where become important to all of us who eat.

You do not have to be Irish to make a memo for St. Patrick's Day to plant garden peas. Some gardeners have already put those seeds into the ground. Pea seeds germinate well in cold ground but the garden soil should not be dug, spaded, or planted until it is dry enough to crumble nicely in your hand. Sodden lumps are to be avoided.

Aside from peas, March is also the time to direct sow seeds of beets, carrots, Swiss chard, lettuce and other salad greens, and also radishes, spinach, and turnips. March is also time to plant onion sets. In our area Swiss chard is a more reliable crop than spinach because as sudden heat hits the garden, spinach bolts, bursting into flower. The Swiss chard hangs in there, allowing you to harvest the outer leaves over a long time. It also comes in designer colors to add charm to your flowerbed.

Some seedling plants are happy to go into the ground in March. These cool weather seedlings include broccoli, cabbage, greens, lettuce, and even a second planting of peas and potatoes. If you have a greenhouse (or grow-lights in a corner somewhere) you can start seeds of beans, corn and cucumbers. The idea of transplanting corn may strike us as downright peculiar but it does hasten those buttery ears.

If you have seedling plants of eggplant and peppers, wait until the soil is warm. The average date of Tidewater's last killing frost is between April 10 and April 21. Actually the planting date for specific vegetables depends on the hardiness of the particular crop. There is usually information on the seed packets that is useful even though it is designed to cover climate in a wider area than just Tidewater Virginia. Gardening neighbors love to share what they have learned from experience, so ask!

How about beets? Tech recommends 'Ruby Queen' and 'Detroit Dark Red' for Virginia gardens. Although I like beets even canned and pickled, I have not tried any of the new non-red varieties that now come in white, gold, and candy striped. It bothers me not a bit to slide off the red skins leaving me with pink fingers. Beets store well and they tend to keep their sweetness during storage. They are sweet, about 6 to 7% sugar although those types grown for sugar top off at 15 – 20%.

One advantage of growing your own beets is having their delectable greens available. For a sumptuous supper, try a mound of baby beets with their own greens. Grown-up beets can be roasted in a hot oven, 400 degrees, that will caramelize their sugar giving them an exotic taste. Even children, reluctant to eat regular Brussels sprouts and beets, don't seem to recognize them when roasted.

For those of us who may not have sunny space to grow vegetables, local farmers markets are a blessing. So it may be an extra stop on your grocery shopping, but make the effort. It pays off not only in your own family's health, but in the health of our local economy as well.

Fake food update:

We have looked to Silicon Valley to provide us with the ever-smarter phones that will eventually be able to change the oil and do the taxes, but food? False food, fake food, tofu-burgers, do not nudge us to the dinner table. Now it is that perfect food, the egg, that is due for a remake from fake food pioneers. This egg-less egg is designed to bypass the miserable factory egg farm where confined chickens do the producing. The inventive end result will be a product for use in things like cookies and mayonnaise. These efforts, both for eggs and meat, are a high tech use of plant proteins, which will retain the nutrient value as well as the real taste of authentic eggs and meat. It is reported that these new foods will be marketed in 2014. *Bon Appetit.*

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