

Dreaming of Vegetables

The fourth rainy day in a row drives me into the kitchen to peel, pare, chop and dice vegetables for soup. One recipe calls for parsnips and apples for sweetness and another one requires a slurp of maple syrup? That last I may never try. However the addition of parsnips, when you can find them, to soup is a plus, even if you never outgrew your childhood aversion to parsnips. Soup is the great leveler. Like a family reunion, the amalgam of personalities adds up to a product more delectable in total than the sum of its parts.

When you plan your vegetable garden, use a favorite cookbook as a guide. If you consider the onion family essential to good housekeeping, try growing baby pearl onions, bunching onions, shallots, even leeks. They are not difficult – assuming one follows the directions on the seed packet. The more familiar sorts are available in ‘sets’ for transplanting in spring, but if you are adventurous, you will find inspiration in catalog listings. Onions love cool weather so by starting early with seeds you will have transplants that will mature before it gets blistering hot.

Check the catalog so you will know which varieties must be enjoyed fresh and which can be braided and hung from the rafters to last a year. Even a small plot has space for a few greens and a few herbs. We all love to add homegrown herbs to a dinner dish and growing them can become an addiction! Said to be most easily grown after being sown directly into your plot are two of the most essential herbs, dill and basil. Genovese basil grows to two feet with large leaves of robust flavor, perfect for pesto. Dukat dill is an open-pollinated annual so the seeds can be saved and will come true to variety. I have failed with dill frequently but probably planted it too late. It should be planted in very early spring and thinned to about four inches apart.

Some herbs are free! For the past several years a few plants of Perilla have volunteered along the driveway. Usually I leave them as the deep burgundy/bronze foliage adds spice to the mostly green area. Now I discover I can eat those pretty leaves. Perilla frutescens, also called beefsteak plant, resembles the annual Coleus and the leaves have the complex flavor of cilantro and cumin with a dash of cinnamon? As an Asian herb related to mint (it has 4-angled stems) and basil, it is called Shiso in Asian recipes. Now that I hope to use it, it may neglect to appear next summer, do you suppose?

Asian greens are increasingly available in the new catalogs, now arriving in a shower. They make you want to go outside and start digging!

OUR BRAVE NEW WORLD

Because of its geographic location California is set to become the state that shows the rest of us how to develop alternative sources of energy. “West” has an advantage both because of sun and wind and because of savvy young entrepreneurs with technical backgrounds. Some energy experts believe that the reason Europe and

Japan have made greater gains in energy independence than we have is due to the consistent support offered by those governments.

In a related effort, experts who have studied our post-peak-oil future are convinced that we need to recreate the economic web beginning with growing our food close to home. Agriculture may become the center of economic life in which a community is a network of wholesalers, middlemen, and retailers. Reading about these projected futures reminds many of us of the way it used to be. Way back when, most of what we needed was available locally so an occasional trip to 'the city' was a rare treat. Of course we didn't have TV telling us about all the stuff we had not known we needed?

Other reports emphasize the health costs of our porky purchases of processed foods. Obesity is expensive, costing 100 billion a year for the treatment of obesity and diet-related diseases. When it is discovered that imported food is responsible for making people sick, it gets a lot of attention but the attention fades rapidly until the next crisis. The same reaction occurs periodically when the horrors of factory farms are exposed. Over the past thirty years editorials have demanded something be done but little changes. One plus, fewer antibiotics are given to crowded animals as a preventive measure. Factory farms remain top polluters of air and water as well as vendors of 'bugs' we'd prefer not to think about.

Gardeners, who because they do garden have a closer relationship with food sources than other citizens, should ask questions about food in local schools, hospitals, and restaurants: a simple question is enough "Where did it come from?"