

Perennial Vegetables

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Discover the advantages of perennial vegetables

Here in the Skagit Valley, we are surrounded by perennial food plants. Apples, blueberries, raspberries and strawberries grow on farms and in backyards. Wild salmonberries, thimbleberries and blackberries line our highways and wood margins every summer. Yet with the notable exceptions of rhubarb, asparagus and sometimes artichokes, most of us grow only annuals in our vegetable gardens. These are plants that die at the end of each season, generally requiring annual tilling and replanting.

Vegetables haven't always been so exclusively annual, however, and gardeners across the country are rediscovering the benefits of growing perennial vegetable crops. Although they are not usually considered as tasty as their annual counterparts, perennial greens and root crops often are more nutritious, and they can extend our growing season by providing food earlier and later each year. They also help to prevent soil erosion, promote beneficial microbes and suppress weeds. Best of all, because they return each year without being replanted, they are generally much easier to grow and maintain than annual food plants. In many cases, thinning and mulching are the main work required to take advantage of these nutritious and fascinating vegetables.

If you decide to add a few perennial vegetables to your garden, you will want to devote a separate space to each one. This will keep them contained and prevent them from interfering with the planting of your annual crops. And, note that although the Pacific Northwest has great potential for perennials—including brassicas (broccoli, collards and the like), root crops, onions, watercress and more—relatively few perennial vegetables are readily available as plants or seeds for purchase. What follows is a partial list of the perennial vegetables that are currently available. These should do well in most gardens in the Skagit Valley.

Sunchokes or Jerusalem artichokes

Grown for its small, sweet tubers, this plant is related to the sunflower and, like that familiar ornamental, it grows very tall (6–12 feet) and produces yellow flowers. These plants can be hilled like potatoes to increase yield and should be harvested as needed after the first frost. They are vigorous spreaders and thus need to be contained and thinned regularly. Sunchoke tubers can be baked or mashed or eaten raw in salads. Take note, though, that they contain inulin—a starch not widely consumed in our diets—so they may cause gas if you are not accustomed to them. Sunchokes are sometimes available as seed, and they can be purchased as food at some farmers' markets or the Skagit Valley Food Co-op. Plant the tuber directly in the ground in the spring.

Welsh onions

Though commonly grown as an annual crop, these scallions are a perennial. Their mild greens can be harvested and eaten raw or cooked throughout the year. The plants can be started from seed and will form in a clump which can be divided in the spring to harvest as scallions. Replanting a few will provide new clumps the following year. Welsh onion seed is available

from Bountiful Gardens Nursery (www.BountifulGardens.org), which sells a mix of perennial vegetable seeds that also includes sorrel and Good King Henry (see below), as well as asparagus, sea kale, perpetual spinach and others.

French sorrel

This lemony, slightly acidic green is often called for in recipes but is difficult to find in grocery stores because it doesn't keep for more than a few days after harvest. Fortunately, it is easy to grow from seed and can be eaten both fresh and cooked. Sorrel tends to get quite bitter after flowering (some recipes even call for this more mature, bitter sorrel!), but cutting back the flower stalk will ensure a long supply of tender greens. There are also nonflowering varieties whose leaves remain less bitter.

Good King Henry

This nutritious European native has been grown for hundreds of years. It should be planted in a sunny to partially shaded location and will be established enough to harvest and eat in its second year. The young shoots can be cut in the spring and cooked like asparagus. Then the leaves can be harvested and cooked as greens through late summer. The leaves are spinach-like, but slightly more bitter. Good King Henry is cold hardy and reportedly needs little maintenance.

Tree collards

Though there are many perennial brassicas, they are not always easy to find. One irresistibly striking variety whose seed is available is "walking stick" cabbage or kale. This plant prefers a well-fertilized soil and looks like a thin palm tree with leaves sprouting from the top. These leaves can be harvested from early- to mid-fall and should be cooked before eaten. Seed for this and some other perennial vegetables can be purchased from Thompson and Morgan Seeds (www.tmseeds.com).

Bamboo shoots

Bamboo in the Pacific Northwest tends to be tall and running, making it impractical to grow primarily as a food crop. However, when considering bamboo for fencing or other purposes, it would be worthwhile to plant one of many edible varieties. Bamboo shoots can add crisp, crunchy texture to plenty of prepared dishes, and harvesting bamboo shoots for food is a great way to help control its spread to unwanted areas. Edible bamboo is available from Blue Heron Farm in Rockport (360.853.8449).



Walking stick cabbage prefers well-fertilized soil and looks like a thin palm tree with leaves sprouting from the top. Its leaves can be harvested from early- to mid-fall and should be cooked before eaten.

Photo courtesy of Thompson & Morgan, Inc.

Nettles

This common weed is actually an extremely nutritious green, rich in vitamins A and C, iron, calcium, magnesium and more. Young shoots and leaves have a mild flavor and can be steamed or used in soups and in other recipes calling for greens. However, the plant does release a skin irritant when touched, so you'll want to harvest them with scissors and gloves. Drying, cooking or simply wilting will remove the stinging qualities.

Skirret

This low-maintenance crop produces an abundance of long, thin, parsnip-like roots after its second year. (The first year's roots are woodier and less tasty.) Skirret is a cold-hardy crop that does well in moist conditions and partial shade. It grows in clumps and the roots are easily divided so you can replant a few at harvest and then eat the rest. It is pest-resistant, and its flowers attract beneficial insects for the garden. Some of the U.S. seed catalogs that once sold skirret seed no longer have it, but it is still available through some British seed companies, including Magic Garden Seeds (www.magicgardenseeds.com).



Nettles are an extremely nutritious green, rich in vitamins A and C, iron, calcium, magnesium and more. Young shoots and leaves can be steamed or used in soups and in other recipes calling for greens. Photo by Jason Miller.

For more information and a great list of references, see Eric Toensmeier's book, *Perennial Vegetables* (2007, Chelsea Green Publishing). For local information about perennial gardening and low-input food systems, contact Perennial Harvest at perennialharvest@gmail.com (web site coming soon).