Perennial Vegetables Make Gardening Easy

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The good news is that the earth seems to want to feed us.

The bad news, you may have noticed, that food prices keep going up and up, along with the cost of everything else. We are running into a hard reality here. The Earth is only so big and more and more people join us upon it every day. They all need to eat and the law of supply and demand says that the more people want/need something the higher the price. So a lot of us are experimenting with sustainable food sources, the gardens in our back yards.

Some of us find that the more traditional style of gardening, planting long rows of annual veggies every year, is tedious and so we want to establish perennial edibles. It’s not too late to plants to future years, since our frost free date has just passed.

Asparagus is beloved early spring vegetable that comes back every year. Another one of the tried and true come-back-every year is the old English Good King Henry (Chenopodium bonus-henricus L.) also called “Poor Mans Asparagus.” that can grow in partial shade. It is reliable and low maintenance. The shoots are the edible part and they show up three weeks before asparagus.

Spring greens nourished many of our ancestors after a long winter. They looked for the first fiddleheads of the ostrich fern and giant solomon seal. Pokeweed sent up savory greens before the rest of its poisonous growth. Rhubarb's stems have joined in making many a delicious strawberry pie. We like sunchokes for their roots that taste like water chestnuts. The voles loved mine to death this year, but that's gardening.

Canna lilies! Those elegant tropical-looking ornamentals, are also edible. They live in wet soils in full sun or partial shade. Marginal soils are fine. The roots are good as are the young shoots. The leaves can be used to wrap tamales.

Some of our annual row crops now come in perennial form: Perennial broccoli called "9 star" is available. All seed heads must be harvested or the plant will die, believing it has done its reproductive duty. Tree collards and perennial Kale are available, along with branching bush kale. Even cactus. Mexicans have been eating the prickly pear pads for years and calling it "nopales." Davidson River Road hosts a splendid one. You can too, with well-drained soil.
If you are lucky enough to have a shallow, slow-running stream, watercress is a great source of vitamins A, B, and C, along with calcium and iron. It will also grow in ordinary soil kept wet.

The young shoots of bamboo are delicious. And nettles are nutritious and delicious as well, but wear gloves when harvesting. Nettles are a lively addition to the yard because they keep other plants healthier and more immune to bugs.

The air potato intrigues me. Some wild ones are poisonous, but I'll be trying to find the non-poisonous ones the size of an apple that hangs off the vine for picking. Meantime, the regular potato is a "harvest and replant" vegetable. When you dig them up, just leave the little ones in the ground and they will keep growing again into big ones for next year.

And ramps! Our own favorite spring ephemeral onion! So named because it shows up in the sign of the Ram or Ares.

To establish a perennial bed requires more planning than an annual one, because the harvesting will remove nutrients from the soil which cannot be disturbed from year to year if the roots are to thrive, so it must be well-fertilized at the start.

The wonderful book from which I got most of this information is called *Perennial Vegetables* by Eric Toensmeier, winner of the American Horticultural Society’s Book Award, available at Highland Books.

**Garden Tasks for late May:**
- Prune hedges
- Divide cannas
- Pest to watch for: aphids, azalea leaf gall, bagworms, azalea lacebugs, boxwood leafminer, scale, and spider mites.
- Spray fruit trees weekly with fungicide
- Plant tomatoes, peppers, melons, etc. after danger of frost has passed
- Plant seed corn, beans, etc. late in month
- Watch for worms on cabbage, broccoli; flea beetle on eggplant and tomato; cucumber beetle on cucumbers.

*Do you have a question for the Transylvania Extension Master Gardeners or a subject you’d like to see addressed in this column? E-mail us at manymoons@citcom.net or have your garden questions answered at our telephone clinic from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Wednesdays, March through October. Call 884-3239 or walk-in during those hours at the Community Services Building, 98 E. Morgan St. The Transylvania Extension Master Gardener program is sponsored by the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service: www.transylvania.ces.ncsu.edu.*