

Think Hot on a Cold Day!

You know the kind of day that I mean, the day when the pansies huddle in their pots and the sun doesn't cast a shadow. The hot could be peppers! It is so warming to gather an armload of catalogues and read about those sizzling vegetables.

Recently one of those time wasting quizzes going the e-mail rounds mentioned asparagus and rhubarb as the only perennial vegetables. Asparagus we recognize as perennial and as welcome a sight as the first daffodil. Rhubarb or pie plant as it is known to those of us who met it as dessert rather than as statuesque garden décor, is more easily considered a fruitful shrub.

Rhubarb, Rheum, is a member of the Polygonaceae family according to the AHS A-Z Encyclopedia of Garden Plants. It is a genus of about 50 species of rhizomatous tough perennials found worldwide. Those not destined for pie are grown for their large luxurious basal leaves and tall slender stems of flower panicles, usually creamy white or deep red. And yes, it is a vegetable and according to the Territorial Seed catalog it belongs to the sorrel family. The Sourwood tree is also known as the Sorrel tree and the shamrock, Oxalis, is also called sorrel. But since neither of these has much of a vegetable persona I find the nomenclature confusing.

However in speaking of perennial vegetables, we may include peppers! They are perennials that are grown as annuals. The genus Capsicum is a tasty ingredient in recipes nearly everywhere and for gardeners peppers are either 'hot' or 'sweet' with many growers claiming to have the hottest peppers north of Texas. The names alone may clue you in to their temperatures; 'Tropical Heat', 'Summer Heat', 'Thai Dragon', 'Prairie Fire'.

For great advice on how to grow and handle them (with gloves) see the February-March issue of Horticulture Magazine, or www.hortmag.com. And the Edible Gardening feature by Master Gardener Peter Garnham.

The article suggests starting seeds inside six weeks before the last frost date. Germination requires a soil temperature of 70-80 degrees, most easily attained by the use of a heat mat. Rather than scarifying the seeds the author suggests placing them in a plastic bag and gently rolling a rolling pin over them. This will produce germination in 8-12 days.

Transplanted into 3 ½ inch pots when they have 3 or 4 sets of true leaves, they grow along until they are about 6" tall, ready to go outside. Peppers like a slightly alkaline soil, pH 7.1 to 8.3 which he recommends being provided by spreading 5 lbs. of bone meal per 400 square feet, tilled in a week before planting. Garnham also recommends cow manure for the phosphorus peppers need.

In the tips given for their care he recommends watching carefully for insect pests, diseases, etc. that are more easily cured if spotted early. 'Do not over feed' is another suggestion as that results in big plants with reduced pepper production. Placing a rain gauge near them, but out from under the developing foliage, helps you provide the inch of water they need each week.

For maximum taste in hot peppers stop watering them a week before harvest, although do not let the plants totally wilt. Crop rotation is essential in areas where fungus blights are prevalent.

TIPS YOU'VE HEARD BEFORE:

In transplanting tomatoes wait until mid or late May as the warmer soil will enable them to catch up with those that rushed the season and stayed small in cooler soil.

Plant the whole tomato plant, leaving only the top leaves marking their territory. Most purchased seedlings are slightly spindly and prone to collapse and by easing them into a deep hole they will send out roots all along the stem. It is the healthy and extensive root system that produces top quality tomatoes. You know of course not to bury leaves, but gently remove those below the soil line. It may be too early for this conversation, but May is just around the corner, isn't it?