

Not Just Broccoli

The forest of fall catalogs has begun to move into our mailboxes and unless you have an empty closet, most leave. Some are hard to part with – the vegetables are so glorious I wish I had a naked plot.

I can't see why any member of the brassica family can't be planted right now for fall harvest. The horticulture advice from Virginia Tech always mentions cabbage, Brassica rapa, and broccoli, Brassica oleracea, as great fall crops for the home garden but why not mustard greens, Brassica juncea? Greens – as in 'a mess of' – have been considered good southern cuisine for generations but somehow greens have been neglected, their nutrition ignored. However, attitudes are changing!

Mustard greens are increasingly fashionable as an ingredient in Oriental recipes. The young leaves can be used raw to add 'bite' to a bland salad and when the plant is mature, mustard greens can be used in stir-fry and soups. These leaves are a source of protein, thiamin, riboflavin, and other healthy needs. All this is listed in the Seeds of Change catalog which also mentions mustard greens as a rich source of dietary fiber, vitamins A,C,B6 and other treasures. According to the catalog "Purple and red 'greens' contain anthocyanin, a compound thought to protect cells and inhibit certain cancers."

It may be too late to plant another brassica, B. napus or rutabaga. It should be planted by mid-summer for a fall harvest, but this turnip relative does get sweeter after frost as do turnips, so may be worth a trial. After all, a few seeds risked now may result in wonderful fall meals you hadn't expected.

Broccoli, B. oleracea is on all the lists of BEST FOOD and even toddlers love broccoli florets to eat with their fingers if they are not cooked to full cabbage-y strength. One good thing about planting broccoli is that after you harvest that first perfect head, the side shoots will develop for more great meals.

Nothing in the vegetable kingdom is more delicious than small beets in a nest of their own greens. Beets, Beta vulgaris, can be sown throughout summer as well as in spring and although they aren't fast food, they aren't so slow either. Greens can be discreetly gathered a little over a month after seeding and most varieties are ready to be pulled in 55 days. Incidentally, have you noticed all the reports that show food grown slowly and organically is much more nutritious than those garden crops hurried along by chemical fertilizers? It reminds us that we need to slow down and savor these late summer days.

What You Do Matters

The lone gardener usually feels that what he does on his small plot has little effect on the big picture. Oddly, the more a gardener learns, the more he realized how little he knows. Although this is true in any field of study, this realization tends to add to a gardener's feeling of helplessness. We must get over it! We must believe that just a few people can make a difference!

The late summer edition of Organic Gardening Magazine highlights places that have been changed by the efforts of a few people working together. For example, in Utah, a group called TreeUtah works on many fronts. Scores of volunteers have planted more than 300,000 trees since 1990 and another of their projects is an 'eco-garden' a permaculture demonstration site.

What was a vacant lot is now a home for fruit and nut trees, vegetables, and a drip irrigation system. These projects involved a lot of people but the impetus to DO something probably came from just one person encountering another on the same wavelength. There are scores of people who want to do something for their own community as a way of helping the world. Living where we do, we see a splendid wealth of volunteering on all manner of projects. It is only a matter of time before the focus is on healthy food, home grown, as one way to curb global warming.

Decades ago Organic Gardening magazine was viewed as preaching to the choir, a small choir. Today all the gardening pubs have joined the chorus. With the current cost of shipping family dinner ingredients not just coast to coast but continent to continent, there is emphasis on eating locally. Naturally, we wouldn't want to see California artichokes becoming an embarrassment on a menu, like a hummer in the driveway, but it is great to see Virginia's good food getting a boost.