

Baby Steps

A veteran perennial gardener turns to veggies

I've put in many years of gardening, but when it comes to growing vegetables in the Willamette Valley I am pretty much a novice. Last year I took some baby steps following our move, in the fall of 2009, to a sunny house and garden already equipped with several board-sided, 8-foot by 4-foot raised beds. Broccoli, string beans and carrots were flourishing there when we moved in, which was encouraging.

Last year was very busy, and my vegetable gardening was sporadic and unplanned. But thanks to those raised beds I made a start, and learned a good deal in the process. For one thing, I learned that it is well worth seizing any short, dry, mild patch of weather in February, even if the weather that follows is wet, cold and miserable. I also learned that however poorly your potatoes grow, you may get something out of it. And I learned that adequate soil fertility is absolutely vital to edible, productive crops. I won't pretend I've mastered how to achieve it.

I learned that I won't be able to grow spinach at all unless I take serious action against slugs and snails; that taking the trouble to plant seed at an appropriate density may be less tedious than thinning the seedlings; and that you should stake your peas *before* they fall over. I also discovered that growing from purchased starts instead of seed is convenient but expensive, and should be reserved for things like broccoli and kale, which produce useful amounts of food from a handful of plants over a long period.

There were some marked successes. Not surprisingly, most were with things that routinely appear on "easy to grow" lists, such as peas, kale and lettuce grown from transplants. The peas I sowed in mid-February were Super Sugar Snap (Territorial Seed Company) a variety that has

very thick, fleshy pods. I didn't particularly like the large pod to pea ratio when they were cooked. Luckily, we and all our friends greatly enjoyed eating the pods raw. The red, oval radishes (incorrectly labeled French Breakfast) germinated readily and grew to a delicious third of an inch long, then stopped and turned woody. Nothing would get them going again. A friend mentioned that radishes must never dry out, but these seemed to need more than unfailing moisture. I suspect the problem was lack of available nutrients in still-cold soil.

Early summer transplants of Red Russian kale are still producing to this day, and the worst challenge they ever faced was from aphids. September transplants of black Italian kale yielded periodic crops all winter (for yummy pasta with greens, oil and garlic) and are clearly poised to make a forest of tender sprouts as the weather warms. I had less luck with chard, which in late summer and fall suffered a nasty attack of leaf-mining borers. I thought the leaves might outgrow the borers with ample liquid food and water, but that didn't work. The only fix appeared to be a floating row cover.

Broccoli planted in late summer just didn't grow much. I think brassicas (excepting kale) need more soil fertility than my old raised beds provided, even with a generous allowance of balanced fertilizer at planting time. This year before planting I'll try manure in addition to fertilizer, and maybe some Azomite. I suspect my long experience growing perennials in fertile clay-loam spoiled me, and I simply cannot conceive of the amount of fertilizer a veggie may require. Fertility early in the year while soils are cold is a common problem for organic gardeners. Some kind of liquid fertilizer is the best remedy for that.



Totally fresh salad greens, year-round if possible, are a high priority for me. One of my happiest discoveries last year was Sylvetta Wild Arugula (also from Territorial) which is somewhat like the kind you get in European restaurants. It was slow to germinate and slow to grow. But it was also slow to bolt and, although quite peppery, it never became inedibly hot in summer as common rocket can. (That common rocket, self-sown in fall, seems to be the one to grow through the winter, though.)

I've been eating corn salad (also known as mache) all winter. I sowed some seed last spring, and the plants promptly bolted. But the prolific seeds they yielded germinated wildly as the weather cooled in fall, and the plants continued to grow steadily without protection. I like to mix the little mache plants with the lushest rosettes I can find of that annoying weed, little bittercress, which equals mache for cold hardiness and is just now beginning to bloom. Some people find it too strong, but I like it in moderation. As my husband could tell you, we like our salads rugged. **EW**

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