

SUMMER'S END

And the virtues of escarole

August went by in flash, as usual. Daily watering chores. Jam making. An ocean of applesauce.

After a week’s vacation in a cabin by the Metolius, I somehow carved out time to think about the fall and winter vegetable garden. Space must be carved out, too, and I’m grateful for any crops that can go in after the pole beans and tomatoes are torn out in October.

But starts of red Russian kale, my favorite for winter eating, need to go in as soon as possible. By October what you see is more or less what you get until growth starts up again in March.

This summer I grew curly kale for the first time, because it’s the best for salads. The plants grew like crazy, looked amazing and produced more leaves than we could ever eat. By July they were tall enough to provide a bit of afternoon shade for basil and salad greens.

This year I made a little more effort than usual to keep a supply of lettuce going through the summer, and just east of mature kale is the perfect place for lettuce. It gets sun in the morning through midday and is shaded by the kale in late afternoon — the hottest part of day in our climate. And I was stunned at the speed with which lettuce starts reached eating size in warm soil.

People who are new to vegetable gardening usually start in spring. It’s logical — that’s when you plant such popular items as tomatoes and zucchini, right?

I’ve begun to wonder, though, if summer isn’t a good time to take some baby steps. The reason? Things grow fast in warm soil and warm air. You can see the difference day to day, and it’s very encouraging. Seeds germinate a little faster and slugs are less of a nuisance. In spring, novices tend to plant too early, when the soil is still cold and nutrients are less available. It’s depressing to see little mud-spattered seedlings poking along or just sitting there, waiting to be devoured by slugs.

There’s still time to sow ultra-hardy greens such as

mustard, lettuce, arugula, corn salad-mache and cilantro, as well as fall-planted garlic, onions and fava beans.

And, of course, there are plenty of other things to do in September and October. It’s an excellent time to plant bulbs, divide perennials, prepare soil, sow cover crops and apply amendments such as lime and rock phosphate.

You can sow chervil and cilantro under kale, broccoli or tomatoes without much root disturbance — just press the seed into the moist soil and cover with a little compost. An occasional feed with liquid fertilizer will make up for any nitrogen deficit from this kind of close planting.

Germination is relatively slow with cilantro. Prep a patch of ground with nitrogen-rich fertilizer, big enough for two or three short rows. Sow one row. When it germinates, sow the next row. Repeat.

Numero uno on my list of winter salad greens is escarole. Last year I tried a broad-leafed variety called Diva from seed I ordered from Adaptive Seeds near Sweet Home (*EW* 2/11.) Diva performed admirably. Escarole seems to be something of a neglected stepchild in the salad world, often lumped in with lettuce in planting guides or else left out altogether.

So let me list the special virtues of this versatile leafy green: For a start, escarole is remarkably cold-hardy. It stays in good condition with minimal protection and even a frost-bitten plant with mushy outer leaves can continue to grow from the center, so don’t give up on it.

Slugs and snails don’t seem to like escarole. Any lettuce seedling that makes it to the surface in my garden will vanish overnight, but growing escarole from seed hasn’t been a problem so far. And it’s delicious, raw or cooked. The first young leaves and, later, the outer leaves are somewhat chewy. The tender, inner leaves are best for salad. The outer leaves are excellent braised or added to soup. Especially bean soup.

The whole plant, including its delectable creamy-pale center, has remarkable substance, which gives escarole a long shelf life. It also contrasts pleasantly with softer-textured hardy greens like corn salad and arugula, both of which can still be sown successfully in early September. ■

Rachel Foster lives and gardens in Eugene, Oregon. She can be reached at rfoster@efn.org.

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