

Gardens

Written by Jeff Poppen
Tuesday, December 4, 2012

Beautiful and extremely productive gardens have graced that land around my cabin for the past 16 years. They have been well documented on the Volunteer Gardener program, so many people who hadn't been able to visit still got to enjoy them. These gardens, open to the public, are where my students learn, and where old gardeners come to learn new ideas.

Since this is the last garden I'll get to grow here, and since it is December, let's look at what is still growing out there. A market garden, or truck patch as it used to be called, gets replanted in late summer with fall vegetables and cover crops. We don't want to leave the land bare, but whenever possible to always have food available.

Horseradish, spearmint and nettle are in the first perennial beds, opposite the lettuce filling up the cold frames. The barn still hosts baskets of pumpkins, which have been picked through to now just be special treats for the hogs. The hanging garlic and onions need to go inside for winter storage.

Bok Choy is the white-ribbed, dark green leafed, oriental cabbage in the first beds behind the barn. Along with the Chinese Cabbage, also called Napa, these vegetables can weigh up to five pounds each. Soups, slaws, stirfries and sauerkraut are but a few ways our customers enjoy these cabbages, which resist the worms way better than their European counterparts.

The two kinds of parsley are curly and Italian Flat-Leaf. I like the curly best, but most people like the Italian. Parsley is very good for you.

Swiss Chard is a member of the beet family. The dark skinny leaves offer a good alteration to the other greens, which are mostly in the brassica, or cabbage family. Chard has a finer texture, and doesn't have that hint of sulfur that cabbages have.

Many of our visitors seem surprised to see celery growing here. What a wonderful plant, it's

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sweet, crisp stalks bursting with flavor. We set out a thousand in the spring. After a few harvests of the outer stalks, we leave them alone during summer, only to really get production in the fall as the weather cools down.

Bloomsdale Long Standing Spinach was sown August 29th, a little later than the time most fall greens are sown. The thin cotyledon leaves are hard to spot, but not so the dark green, savoyed leaves we love in our salads or slightly cooked. I planted another spinach row in late October for a March and April harvest.

A bed of sprouting broccoli is now giving us delicious heads. Nearby, two rows of parsnips are ready to dig.

A little dill still fills our weekly baskets. Arugula, Mizuna, tat soi and mei qing are unusual vegetables that continue to produce. Collards and mustard are more common, and we grow plenty of them.

By far our biggest plantings in the fall are kale, turnips and daikons. We've been saving seed from the flat leaf kale for 25 years or so. We also grow curly kale and Red Russian kale.

Turnips come in many colors. Scarlet Ohno, White Egg, Gold Ball and Purple Top supply red, white, yellow, and purple turnips. Radishes too, are colorful. We have red China Rose, White Daikons, Long Black Spanish, and my favorite, a green one with a bright red, sunburst color flesh. It is called Watermelon Radish, Misota red, or Red Meat, depending on where you buy the seed. Rutabagas are a yellow-fleshed root similar to turnips.

The rest is in cover crops of wheat and vetch, along with a field of barley. I guess I'll sow these gardens back into hay crops after the winter kills back the greens. The soil is great, and will stay great in grass. Maybe I'll get to garden here again, someday.