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Introduction to Perennial Vegetables



Summary:

- In most gardens, vegetables are short-lived. Most are grown as annuals: started in spring and finished by fall. These annuals either die when picked or perish when cold weather arrives.
- A diet of all-annual vegetables is a recent development. Throughout history gardens have been filled with many varieties of edible perennials. This is still true in many parts of the world.
- Some perennial vegetables are familiar – asparagus and rhubarb – but many more are less well known in North America.
- Their benefits include being long-lived while requiring less work, watering, and fertilizing. They often are more nutritious, enhance the soil, and are more resilient to extreme weather events.

Incompatibility with industrial agriculture:

Edible perennials are harvested a little at a time, leaving behind roots or other parts of the plant to continue growing for harvest later in the current season and then to over-winter.

This partial, and then repeated, harvesting is one reason perennial vegetables were ignored and then largely forgotten by the North American food system. They are generally incompatible with the *one-pass-harvesting* method of industrialized agriculture.

Recent revival:

For a long time, they mainly were found in botanical gardens, farm museums, backyard gardens, and out-of-the-way places. But recently, a renewed and growing interest in edible perennials has developed.

There is a spirit of beginning again with a time-tested class of food plants linked to traditional recipes. In large part, this revival is due to an appreciation of their many benefits.

Benefits:

Once established, edible perennials provide many benefits:

- *Low maintenance* – they require a lot less work: they grow without replanting, have deep roots requiring less watering and fertilizing, and often suppress competitors.
- *Resilience* – they produce food for years, sometimes for decades. They tend to be much hardier than annuals, thus withstanding unexpected weather extremes, harsh environmental conditions, and animal and insect pressure.
- *Soil building* – they eliminate need for tillage; support beneficial fungi; improve soil's organic matter, structure, porosity and water retention; and foster useful insects.
- *Extended harvest season* – they provide both early and late harvests greatly extending the growing season. They provide food when annual gardens are unproductive in very early spring or late fall.
- *Enhanced nutrition* – often perennial vegetables provide humans with higher levels of essential nutrients when compared to their annual equivalents.
- *Improved ecosystems* – they aid pollinators

by often flowering early and late in the year. They catch and store nutrients and water otherwise washed away. Some help by providing habitat and food for beneficial fungal, animal and other life-forms which aid in pest control and enhance biodiversity.

- *Sequester carbon* – their longevity and compatibility with no-till practices aids storing carbon in the soil.
- *Aesthetics* – many perennial vegetables are

attractive ornamental plants adding beauty to the edible landscape.

Types of perennial vegetables:

Toensmeier (2007) has written an excellent book on perennial vegetables. The book covers benefits, growing techniques, and species. He categorizes various edible types: *leaves, fruits used as vegetables, shoots, pods and beans, flowers and flower-buds, root crops, and plant/replant root crops.*

What is growing:

Below is the current plant list. Each plant has its own information sheet (the herbs planted in this garden are not listed). It will take a few years to know what grows well on this site given the shade tree, salt runoff from winter sidewalk maintenance, and animal pressure.

- **Cutting celery** (*Apium graveolens*) – known as leaf celery. For salads, soups, and stews.
- **Dakota bunching onion** (*Allium fistulosum*) – a very hardy bunching onion. It divides from the base. Use as spring onions/scallions or green onions.
- **Delft perpetual leeks** (*Allium ampeloprasum*) – winter leek that sprouts new plants from its base.
- **Evergreen hardy onion** (*Allium fistulosum*) – very cold-hardy scallions. Little or no bulbing.
- **Good king henry** (*Blitum bonus henricus*) – many edible parts, producing early in the season until late fall. The leaves are best cooked like spinach. New shoots in spring eaten like asparagus. Flower heads are used like broccoli, and seeds can be used as a grain, somewhat like quinoa.
- **Lovage** (*Levisticum officinale*) – Young leaves taste like celery with hint of anise. Use in spring salads and with potato, rice, soup, and bean dishes.
- **Patience dock** (*Rumex patientia*) – very early leafy green used in salads or cooked like spinach.
- **Perennial sweet lettuce** (*Reichardia picroides*) – also called French Scorzonera. Edible leaves, roots, and flowers. Blooms for a long time, supporting pollinators.
- **Potato onions** (*Allium cepa aggregatum*) – multiplying onion, smaller than regular onions but very easy to grow and keeps for much longer in storage. Example of *plant/replant root crops*: eat the biggest and replant the smallest for next year's crop.
- **Sorrel**:
 - **Garden sorrel** (*Rumex acetosa*) – lemony taste, use raw in salads or cooked like spinach.
 - **Garden sorrel** (*Rumex acetosa* “Low oxalic”) – a cultivar bred for low oxalic acid content.
 - **Red veined sorrel** (*Rumex sanguineus*) – favorite of chefs, eat young leaves raw or cooked.
- **Turkish rocket** (*Bunias orientalis*) – tender spicy mustard greens and florets for stir-frying.
- **Wild strawberry** (*Fragaria virginiana*) – smaller than common strawberries. Loved by wildlife.

Resources:

Crawford, M. (2012) *How to Grow Perennial Vegetables*. Green Books.

Kelsey, A. (2014) *Edible Perennial Gardening*. Permanent Publications.

Morgan, K. (2026) www.washingtonpost.com/home/2026/01/23/perennial-vegetable-gardening/

Toensmeier, E. (2007) *Perennial Vegetables*. Chelsea Green Publishing.

Tucker, A. (2019) *Growing Perennial Foods*. Stone Pier Press.
