



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

PERENNIAL VEGETABLES

By Elaine Applebaum, Placer County Master Gardener

Q I like the idea of growing my own vegetables, but it seems like a lot of work. Are there some that are easier than others?

A There is a newfound interest in growing one's own vegetables for economic, health and environmental reasons. Many of the vegetables we think of for the home garden are annuals, meaning you have to plant them new each year. But perennial vegetables only need planted once and then reward the gardener with relatively carefree harvests year after year.

Cultivated for over 2000 years, asparagus is probably the best known perennial vegetable. Though it takes work to plant initially, a well-prepared bed can produce for 10 to 20 years. Bare root crown divisions are available now at local nurseries.

Artichoke, horseradish and rhubarb are also available in bare root form now. They may not produce a crop the first year after planting, but will increase in size and production for many years. Be advised that artichokes may freeze in the coldest areas but can survive for several years in a protected spot.

There are several perennial alliums, or onions. These include scallions or Japanese bunching onions (*Allium fistulosum*), walking onions (*A. x proliferum*) and ramps or wild leeks (*A. tricoccum*). Mail order catalogs may be your best bet for locating these bulbs.

How about a flower with edible tuberous roots? *Helianthus tuberosus*, Jerusalem artichoke, sunroot or sunchoke, is a tough, drought-tolerant perennial relative of the sunflower that was cultivated by the Native Americans. Crisp, nutty and sweet edible tubers form on the roots of the plant in late fall, after the plant has died back. Prepare the tubers as you would potatoes by frying, baking, steaming or sautéing.

At least three perennial greens are worth considering. Salad burnet (*Sanguisorba minor*) has cucumber-flavored leaves useful in salads, soups and as an addition to cheese dips, hummus and casseroles. Young leaves and stalks of lovage (*Levisticum officinale*) taste like celery and can substitute for it in many recipes. Garden sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*) produces leaves with a lemony tang from spring to fall that can be eaten raw or cooked; use as you would spinach.

A downside to perennial vegetables is that some can become aggressive or weedy. The biggest chore may be harvesting them often enough to keep them from taking over your garden.

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