

IN THE GARDEN

LATITUDE ATTITUDE

Extending the growing season

BY ROBERT A. BROOKS



I have been growing vegetables in Connecticut for nearly 50 years. For much of that time, my growing season, like that of many gardeners in the state, began in early March when I would sow my first rows of peas and spinach and ended in early December with a final harvest of leeks, chard, parsnips, and Brussels sprouts. Winter months were devoted to staving off cabin fever by cleaning and sharpening tools, perusing seed catalogues, reading gardening books, remembering gardens past, and dreaming of gardens to come. Now that my wife and I have opened a restaurant, Still River Café, which features the produce we grow organically in our gardens, this is no longer an option for me. Moreover, as every vegetable grower knows, seed catalogues and gardening books—no matter how beautifully illustrated—are no substitute for the real thing. Happily, thanks to the advent of new technologies, it is now possible to maintain your connection to the soil throughout the winter and enjoy harvests of deliciously fresh vegetables as well, and do so economically and in an environmentally sustainable way.

The approach is not that new at all. Gardeners in Europe have been growing vegetables throughout the winter for generations. The challenge is to convince, say, a head of radicchio sitting in your snow-covered backyard garden in January that it is instead happily ensconced in an *orto* outside of Rome—a sleight of hand that is sur-

prisingly easy to achieve.

In the first place, the radicchio recognizes that the winter sun in Connecticut is every bit as strong as that in Rome thanks to the fact that we both occupy the same latitude. Moreover, freezing temperatures are not the enemy of cold-hardy vegetables; rather it is the deleterious effects of low humidity and dramatic temperature swings which are their undoing. Here's how you can get around these problems.

Start by selecting varieties that can tolerate freezing temperatures. The list is much longer than you might think and includes the aforementioned radicchio, beets, carrots, onions, leeks, radishes, and a wonderful array of greens including claytonia, arugula, mache, wonderful Asian greens like mizuna and tatsoi, and, of course, spinach, chard, and kale.

Timing is also important. Because of low light and cold temperatures, few, if any, seeds will germinate from November through January. Accordingly, it is advisable to plant your winter garden in mid-September, which gives the seeds time to germinate and the seedlings the opportunity to establish root systems that will help them survive winter.

I plant my seeds in cold frames or simple, unheated greenhouses commonly referred to as “high tunnels.” There are numerous ready-

to-assemble kits available online for the home gardener. Alternatively, if you are reasonably handy, you can make your own cold frame. The cold frame is essentially a wooden box with a transparent top. I recommend that you build it approximately 4' x 8', which is not only a standard dimension for lumber you can buy in the hardware store but large enough, at 32 square feet, to provide you with several weeks of fresh vegetables. The front of the frame should be lower than the back—I make mine 8" high—and the frame should be situated so that the front faces south to assure adequate sunlight for all of your seedlings. You can make the top out of either greenhouse poly or a lightweight material made specifically for greenhouse applications known as polycarbonate. You can also use cheap builder's plastic although it will not last as long and lacks the light-transmission properties of plastics designed specifically for growing vegetables. I recommend banking up hay or leaves along the side of the cold frame for added insulation.

When evening temperatures start falling below freezing, add a second layer of protection known as a "floating cover." Floating covers are made of polypropylene mesh and are sold on gardening websites in rolls of varying lengths and widths. They perform the important functions of preserving moisture and moderating temperature swings while at the same time allowing sunlight and air to reach your seedlings.

The results from using floating covers are nothing short of astonishing: On many a sunny but frigid morning, you will discover that the soil beneath the cover is as soft as a freshly tilled garden in May. In fact, this dual-layer system of protection is so effective that in late winter, you may have to remove the floating cover during the day so

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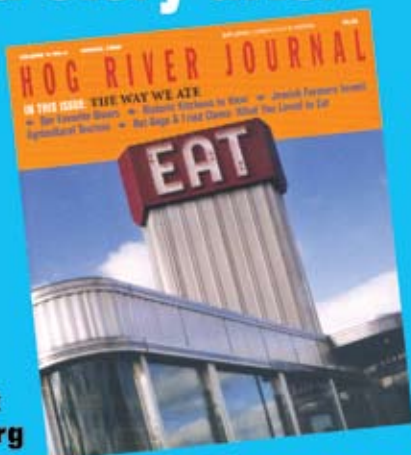
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as not to overheat your vegetables. You will also need to keep your vegetables watered throughout the winter although on a much reduced schedule.

It is important to realize that your winter garden will be largely dormant from mid-November through mid-January because the sunlight is just not strong enough to promote growth, although this will not prevent you from harvesting any crops that got an early start on winter in the fall. The real magic, however, occurs when the sun starts to strengthen in late January and early February, at which time your vegetables will spring back to life and provide you with continuous harvests until your outdoor garden takes over in the spring.

What do the vegetables taste like? We have discovered that many taste better in the winter than in the summer. There is something about the struggle to survive that enhances the taste of vegetables, as anyone who has experienced the blandness of hydroponic produce knows. Our greens are crisper, our arugula and radicchio more distinctive and yet sweeter in February than they are at any other time of year.

There is also the comfort of knowing that in a society where the average meal travels over 1,500 miles to our tables and where agricultural production and distribution is estimated to generate one-third of our greenhouse gases (the same as automobiles), you can reduce your carbon footprint and do something good for the environment.

It is truly the grower's equivalent of having your cake and eating it too. 🥰



STILL RIVER WINTER SALAD WITH ROOT VEGETABLE FRIZZLE

Courtesy of Kara Brooks, Still River Café, Eastford, www.stillrivercafe.com

For the salad:

1 pound mixed winter greens, such as mache, tatsoi, and arugula

1 pound radicchio; clean, washed, and julienned

For the dressing:

3 tablespoons Dijon mustard

1 tablespoon honey

1 tablespoon white balsamic vinegar

1 shallot

¼ cup walnut oil

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves

Salt and pepper to taste

For the parsnips:

1½ pounds parsnips

Olive oil to coat

1 clove garlic, minced

2 tablespoons honey

For the frizzle:

1 red beet

1 golden beet

1 tablespoon of corn starch

Canola oil for frying

Make the frizzle:

Beets, unlike potatoes, do not have enough natural starch to crisp when fried. The addition of corn starch results in beautiful, crispy beet frizzle.

Heat the canola oil (at a depth of at least one inch) to 300°. Peel the beets, thinly slice and julienne. Toss the beets with the corn starch and fry in small batches until crispy. If the

beets are browning, reduce the temperature of the oil. The frizzle should be a brilliant red and yellow.

Roast the parsnips:

Preheat oven to 425°. Peel the parsnips and cut into cubes. Toss the parsnips with honey, melted butter, salt, and pepper. Bake in oven until tender, about 15–20 minutes.

Make the dressing:

Combine the dressing ingredients and whisk until emulsified.

Assemble the salad:

Combine the winter greens and radicchio and toss with the dressing. Top with the roasted parsnips and root vegetable frizzle.