

Shelton-Mason County Journal - Dedicated to the citizens of Mason County, Washington since 1886

'Tis seed season

Peninsula Permaculture · March 3, 2022 · Page A-7



By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: One-year-old Caucasian Mountain Spinach raring to go for up to half a century. (Photo by Alex Féthière)

Last year I wrote about my springtime seed choices with a little trepidation. I was concerned one of the smaller catalogs might receive enough exposure to sell out faster.

This year I'm happy to put Experimental Farm Network — experimentalfarmnetwork.org — front and center. I'm pleased for them, but not the prospects of future seed availability: my news feed delivered a writeup including them from The New York Times. Next year I'll have to order even earlier.

EFN's catalog was my largest seed supplier last year, and 2022 is no different. With stars like Caucasian Mountain Spinach, (allegedly) perennial Denver Ground Cherries and berry-laden edible green Njama Njama, it's the most unusual inventory of international food seeds I've found — and many of its offerings are perennials.

Caucasian Mountain Spinach (*H. tamnoides*) is last year's favorite, and an EFN exclusive that's still available as of this writing. It's offering semi-improved seeds as a "grex" or breeding material; plants from this highly diverse genetic pool will self-select individuals adapted to a given region's conditions.

I wrote about them in September, before autumnal slugs or winter had harmed them. Slugs only attacked severely stressed plants, but could not damage the buried root crown enough to prevent regeneration months later.

I'm proud of several individuals that overwintered in South Sound. They are small and I was unsure of their fortitude in 2021's deep freeze. I green-housed them with heating pads, but not before their half-gallon pots had frozen solid.

They began budding in early January and are already leafing out! After last year's massive mortalities at every stage, from germination to transplanting to scathing heat, I'm confident these can survive even the starkest vagaries of a climate-changed Olympic Peninsula.

Hablitzia tamnoides don't grow much in their first year. I look forward to the vining, spreading and longevity that most accounts promise — even in shade, of which I have plenty.

Njama Njama and Korean Silkflower are showy landscape plants with abundant tasty greens. Njama Njama was covered with juicy purple berries that will tickle birds' fancy, and I found a couple of

volunteers several yards from each plant.

Korean Silkflower, being in the mallow family like our native Dwarf Checkermallow, thrives and flowers here. Its pretty flowers resemble those of okra or hibiscus and make a landscape accent that you might prefer to its mucilaginous leaves.

This year I'm eager to try the improved Lily White Seakale, a cabbage-like perennial with extremely crunchy leaves and an edible root that I have yet to sample. I planted unimproved seeds from Cultivariable and some have come back every year since 2017. Maybe I'll eat a couple of the old roots when these new ones take, though they'll likely be woody.

Polish Root Parsley continues to please. The biennial roots are resprouting long after the non-taprooted parsley varieties died. Between both types I managed to have parsley almost year-round. I'm still able to harvest leaves from the roots I didn't eat, and can do so until they start to set seed — which I will dutifully save.

Originally published in the print edition of the Shelton-Mason County Journal, March 3, 2022, page A-7.

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