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Cellar in place: Oca

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: These oca gems were harvested for the dinner that fueled this column. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

As we shelter in place again, my thoughts drift to cellaring in place. Maybe it's because my salad seems boring without avocados, which are too much trouble to buy now.

I dressed up some stew with fresh tree collards and frozen nettles yesterday. Salad is always trickier with its perishable foundation and persnickety toppings that necessitate regular grocery trips.

Tonight's salad was saved by another of the Andean tubers. Oca is crunchy, tart and very refreshing. I skimmed the oca beds for tubers exposed by the rain, then washed and trimmed them for salad.

Oca can be cooked or eaten raw like the yacón I wrote about earlier. I've never cooked it because I always need raw foods to dress up stored staples.

When sliced in coins it dresses a salad in agates. What else is so twinkly and presentable through winter? It's almost worth taking a Picture of Your Food for social media.

On Harstine Island, we had a cold snap in autumn, and that damages root crops exposed by heavy rain. Some of my potatoes, oca and mashua were frozen. Ruptured tissue was quickly torn into by slugs, who were followed by millipedes and pill bugs that savored the trauma.

Just below the holey oca were quite a few intact ones. When the stems of oca die in the first freeze, they fall like straw over the tubers around the base, offering some frost and erosion protection. In previous years I had dug them up and kept them in the crisper. Another year I stored them in damp sand as if in a root cellar. Now I see that was a lot of unnecessary toil.

With adequate protection from frost and heavy rains, oca can be cellared in place on Harstine Island. Elsewhere in foothill or inland Mason County, freezes might be deep enough to juice your tubers.

If I anticipate a heavy freeze and snow, I will try to save some of the crop by covering it with at least 6 inches of dead leaves. That's a sound practice anyway for soil enrichment and slowing erosion.

Critters have not disturbed my oca over several years of cultivation. I doubt that even leaf cover would draw them to it.

They might find the acidity too bracing: oca is rich in vitamin C and high in iron. In sharing a genus with wood sorrel, its leaves have the sourness of that family and are just as edible.

I don't find myself eating the leaves much in summer. A sorrel or dock fills the same slot and is more handsome in a salad.

Oca is essentially a two-crop self-propagating perennial that grows in poor soil, cellars in place and functions like a potato or salad garnish. It's hard to beat that array of traits.

It needs water to make it through our dry summers for fall tuber development. Oca is vigorous enough to suppress weeds. Whenever I harvest it, I always miss a tuber or two, and find it only when it sprouts.

Like most crops, oca should be rotated. Repeated site-specific cultivation might encourage viruses that reduce yields and tuber size. That said, I haven't seen it. Two years of cropping in the same place yielded tubers of the same size, color and taste. Still, I aim to follow the best practices advocated by William Whitson of Cultivariable: rotating them out each year and not planting oca, potatoes or ulluco (which share viruses) in that plot for one to three years.

Cellaring in place was unkind to my ulluco, but I'll have more to say later about mashua. I look forward to sharing wintergarden discoveries as they unfold!

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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