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Fifty-year spinach

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By Alex Féthière



Safe in its shopping-cart nursery, seven-month old Caucasian spinach is just starting to put on growth. (*Alex Féthière*)

Spinach is a ubiquitous green in our culture, and grocery stores have ruined it for me.

It's fragile when bundled and intolerant of mishandling. When spoiling in a clamshell of mixed greens, it quickly rots the lot.

I briefly put it in everything from stews to pastries when I found it at a local Indian grocer in Queens, New York. Though not organic, it was in field-fresh condition. As I stood admiring it for the first time, no fewer than five South Asian housewives examined a couple of bundles with a frown and walked away. One made a scornful spitting noise.

In nonvegetarian cultures, subpar spinach might be overlooked because generic edible vegetation never takes center stage. The need for a versatile nutritious green that keeps fresh has prodded me to try growing everything from Malabar spinach (tasteless and a bit slimy) to amaranth greens (tough and somewhat astringent).

Tree collards are an essential perennial staple around here, but their musky Brassica taste is sometimes not neutral enough. When I discovered *Hablitzia tamnoides*, I was thrilled that it checked all the boxes.

So-called "Caucasian spinach" is a vining perennial from the Caucasus Mountains. Its relatives in the amaranth family explain its comparability to beets, chard, quinoa and lamb's quarters.

Other gardeners have said they had trouble starting it, and I found that the germination rate was fair, but slow. I cold-stratified it in the refrigerator for a month before starting it in seed flats on sterile mix, in spring.

Those plants have finally grown big enough to taste. They should be transplanted from seed flats into gallon pots to minimize recurring transplant shock. Most will continue to grow at an unremarkable rate. Some will die in the flats stage, more will die after transplantation.

This brutal summer was clearly too harsh for them, so they've moved from under shadecloth to open sun several times - usually after mortalities. This ongoing toll has meant that I've lost over half of them, but those that remain are vigorous individuals indeed.

The taste and texture have also changed since summer. In June it was bitter and chalky. I wouldn't have written about them at all but for the leaf I tried this afternoon: incredibly crisp, like a Romaine rib but fibrous with bursting cells of juice tasting slightly of spinach and the sea.

I couldn't imagine consigning this green to the pot or pan! Perhaps, in its natural range, people must do so because it climbs up to 10 feet and can carpet vast areas in ideal conditions.

In *Permaculture Activist* magazine, Justin West describes finding a *Hablitzia* group that had colonized the floor of an Armenian mountain cave. It is found all over central Asia and throughout Scandinavia, so I'll be very interested to see how it takes to the South Sound.

Sweden is the home of the *Hablitzia*'s oldest known individual, said to have lived half a century. According to <http://www.leereich.com>, dividing the root crowns after winter dieback is the surest method of propagation - though allowing the pinhead-size seeds to settle where they will might speed groundcover spread.

Perhaps *Hablitzia*'s most exciting property is its preference for part shade. Happy to sprawl on the ground or twine like a clematis, it can fill a couple of challenging niches in permaculture design: shade areas under canopy, where groundcover may be occluded or vining plants must climb to reach light.

Before mine can fill those roles, they'll need to get a lot bigger and prove their mettle against slugs. Next spring a few will venture forth from the shopping-cart nursery that keeps them above harm and make their debut in the soil.